

The Vincentian Charism Fidelity to the Founder's Charism

Antonio Orcajo, CM

Introduction

This year, 2017, we are celebrating the 400th anniversary of the origin of the Vincentian Charism. On 25 January 1617, the tutor of the De Gondi children, Vincent de Paul, preached a sermon to the faithful of the parish in Folleville (the region of Picardy, France), a village that was part of the De Gondi estate. The sermon touched Vincent's listeners and, today, motivates us to celebrate the birth of the charism.

The members of the Congregation of the Mission have always celebrated January 25th as "their" feast day and the rest of the Vincentian Family was limited to congratulating them. This celebration of the 400th Anniversary of the Vincentian Charism is shared by all the members of the Vincentian Family, not only members of the traditional branches (members of the International Association of Charities, of the Congregation of the Mission, of the Company of the Daughters of Charity, of the Miraculous Medal Association, of the Vincentian Marian Youth, of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, of the Vincentian Lay Missionaries), but also members of all those branches inspired by the Vincentian Charism. Indeed, there are millions of men and women who are members of the worldwide Vincentian Family, all of whom are inspired by the gospel spirit of Vincent de Paul.

We ask, therefore, what charism is being referenced: the charism of evangelization or the charism of the Founder? There is no doubt about the fact that Vincent referred to the sermon at Folleville as “the first sermon of the Mission” (CCD:XI:4).¹ Furthermore, Vincent viewed 25 January 1617 as the day on which the Congregation of the Mission was born. Such considerations, however, demand a hermeneutic that is contextualized within the emotional confines in which the charism was expressed.

This celebration of the Vincentian Charism is most welcome because we are able to deepen our understanding of that charism which has been gifted to us by Vincent de Paul. At the same time, we are able to reflect on our own vocational story and we also can rewrite the theology of the charism (a word that is often used but, at the same time, used with no reference to the religious and spiritual context that influenced and inspired Saint Paul and the Church’s magisterium).

Three fundamental documents of the Church’s magisterium will be used to ground this presentation: the Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelica Testificatio* (ET); the Decree, *Mutuae Relationes* (MR); the Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita Consecrata* (VC). These documents are rooted in other documents that were approved during the Second Vatican Council, more specifically, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, and the Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis*.

The Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelica Testificatio*, (on the renewal of religious life) was promulgated by Paul VI on 29 June 1971 (the feast of Saint Peter and Saint Paul). The Decree, *Mutuae Relationes*, which outlines the pastoral principles that should guide

¹ *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 XI, p. 4; future references to this work will be inserted into the text using the initials [CCD] followed by the volume number, then the page number.

the relationships between bishops and religious, was promulgated by the Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes on 14 May 1978. Finally, the Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita Consecrata*, was promulgated by John Paul II on March 25, 1996, and was addressed to the bishops and clergy, religious orders and congregations, societies of apostolic life, secular institutes, and all the faithful.

The invitation of the Second Vatican Council was to engage in a process of renewal under the inspiration of the Spirit, thus returning to “the original spirit of the institutes” and to “the founders’ spirit and special aims” (PC, #2). This invitation led theologians to focus their attention on a deeper understanding of the charism. The charism, which was gifted to the founders, was not a private gift, something that belonged in some exclusive manner to them. Rather it was a gift that was given to the whole Church.

It would be good to take the time to reflect upon some material that has been published in recent years on the spirit, vocation, mission, identity, and charism of Vincent de Paul. More specifically, I refer to the XXII Vincentian Studies Week that was held in August 1995 in Salamanca, which was entitled *Let Us Relive the Vincentian Spirit* (the conferences and various workshops were published by Editorial CEME). For a basic bibliography, I refer the reader to *Concilium*, an international theological journal, #129 published in 1977 and dedicated to the theme of “The Charisms.” I also recommend the work of Fabio Ciardi, *Los fundadores, hombres del espíritu* (The Founders, Spirit-filled Men and Women). This work was published by Ediciones Paulinas, Madrid, 1983.

In more recent years, many distinguished Vincentian scholars from various parts of the world have written about and commented on the charism of Vincent de Paul. Each one of those individuals has used his/her own particular historical, theological, and/or juridical perspective in order to come to some conclusion in this regard. As might be expected, the differences in the development and the approach to this subject are most obvious.

[1.] Nature and evolution of the word *charism*

Charism comes from the Greek χάρισμα, *khárisma*, and is related to the root from which the word *grace* is derived, χάρις, *kharis*, *grace*. Thus, *charism* is the result of a grace that is given by the Holy Spirit, the Author of every gift. We note here, however, that the word *charism* was seldom utilized in classical, secular Greek. Today, those persons who are renowned for some type of activity or outstanding in some field of knowledge (science, politics, economics, sports, art, etc.) are often referred to as persons who possess a *charism*, or as charismatic individuals. Almost any human ability is referred to as a *charism*.

Charism, in a religious context, is understood as a gift that the Spirit bestows upon an individual for the good of the faithful and of the Church and as a means to remedy specific needs. Charism is a “manifestation of the Spirit that is given for some benefit” (1 Corinthians 12:7).

In accord with the needs of the time, the Spirit enriches men and women with special graces that enable them to confront and resolve calamitous situations, which afflict humankind and the Church. Founders confronted those situations that arose on various fronts: educational/cultural, social/religious, prayer/contemplation, evangelization/outreach. To mention just a few groups here, such activity was initiated by the Benedictines, Dominicans, Franciscans, Jesuits, Salesians, and countless others groups of consecrated men and women.

In order to understand things better, the origin of a community has to be framed within the broader context of salvation and the building up of the Church. Therefore, the response to the situations that give rise to an institute should not be sought simply in an analysis of the historical and social phenomenon that existed at that time. Such elements are certainly important, but even more important is the

charism of the Founder. The Spirit bestows his graces and gifts to whomever he wishes, however he wishes, and whenever he wishes. For us, the movement of the Spirit is mysterious and often beyond our understanding.

Pope John Paul II, in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Redemptionis donum*, speaks explicitly about the charism as a gift that is given to consecrated persons as well as to the community. The Pope does not hesitate to affirm that in such gifts men and women will find valid elements that will strengthen them as they live their consecration: *It is difficult to describe, or even to list, the many different ways in which consecrated persons fulfill their love for the Church through the apostolate. This apostolate is always born from that particular gift of your founders, which, received from God and approved by the Church, has become a charism for the whole community (Redemptionis donum, #15).*

No biographer of Vincent de Paul had dared to speak about the *charism* that the Spirit bestowed upon Vincent in the year 1617, a pivotal year in Vincent's priestly and missionary life. We should not be surprised by that fact because up until the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the word *charism* was rarely used and when it was used it was only in light of the understanding of Saint Paul (cf., Romans 1:11, 5:15, 6:23, 11:29, 12:6; 1 Corinthians 12:4, 9, 28, 30-31; 2 Corinthians 1:11; Ephesians 4:11-13; 1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6) and Saint Peter (who used the word only once, 1 Peter 4:10). Here we make note of the fact that not all the translators of the original Greek Bible (beginning with Saint Jerome, the author of the *Vulgate*) translated the word *χάρισμα* with the word *charism*, but used other synonyms.

[1.1.] Charism for founding and charism of the founder

Various authors make a distinction between the charism for founding and the charism of the founder. The first is understood as

the ability to found/establish, an ability that is not transferrable. On the other hand, the charism of the founder is a special grace that is manifested as a specific spiritual faith experience, an experience that is incarnated and embodied in the life of a man/woman. In fact, the charism for founding is framed within the charism of the founder and thus both of these can be reduced to the single reality of the charism of the founder. Through the charism one is entrusted with a mission in the Church, a work of service on behalf of others (cf. Ephesians 4:12).

In addition to the charism for founding, Vincent received other gifts from the Spirit that also could be used to describe his personality. For example, Vincent received the gift that enabled him to touch the hearts of his listeners and, in fact, they considered themselves as most blessed to be able to listen to Vincent and to follow his teachings. Brother Ducourneau, Vincent's secretary, wrote the following words in his "Memo on the Talks of Saint Vincent": *If the works he has done are works of God, as they seem to be, God must have given him His Spirit to do and maintain them: consequently, the advice and teachings used for that purpose must be considered divine and be gathered up like manna from heaven, whose various tastes have attracted so many different persons of both sexes and of every rank, associated in various ways for so many different good works untaken and sustained by his guidance* (CCD:XI:xxvii-xxviii).

The fact that, on 25 January 1617, Vincent was enlightened with regard to his priestly vocation has led some to affirm that on that day he received a charismatic seed (an insight that perhaps was veiled). If, at that time, he did not receive it manifestly, he certainly received it later, shining most brightly.

Others claim that this charismatic seed was deposited in the soul of Vincent de Paul when he passed through that painful temptation against his faith, a temptation which lasted from three to four years (1612-1615). His first biographer, Louis Abelly, says that he was freed from that temptation when he made *a firm and unbreakable*

resolve to honor Jesus Christ and to imitate him more perfectly than ever before by committing his entire life to the service of the poor (Abelly, III:115-116).²

[2] Social and religious context that led to the establishment of the Mission and charity

In order to understand Vincent's charism we have to distinguish his call to evangelize the poor from his later decision to found the Congregation of the Mission. We should not lose sight of the fact that Vincent, before receiving the charism as a founder, was enriched by the Spirit of God with many other graces that prepared him to be an outstanding evangelizer and a distinguished herald of charity and to serve so many men and women afflicted with both material and spiritual poverty.

Two experiences, one that occurred in January 1617 and the other in August of the same year, become our reference points. Both experiences gave origin to the mission and charity and ultimately became the Congregation of the Mission (1625) and the Company of the Daughters of Charity (1633). We note here that there already existed Associations of the Mission and Confraternities of Charity, but Vincent was able to give those institutions a new structure, a new life.³

² Louis Abelly, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul: Founder and First Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission*, 3 vol., edited by John E. Rybolt, CM, translated by William Quinn, FSC, notes by Edward R. Udovic, CM, and John E. Rybolt, CM, introduction by Stafford Poole, CM, New City Press, New Rochelle, New York, 1993. Future references to this work will be inserted into the text using the name (Abelly), followed by the volume number (I, II, or III), followed by the page number.

³ Cf. Marion, M., *Dictionnaire des Institutions de la France aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles* [*Dictionary of Institutions of France in the 17th and 18th Centuries*], Paris Édit. A. & J. Picard, 1976, sub v. « Confréries » [“Confraternities”]; Taveneaux, R., *Le catholicisme dans la France classique 1610-1715* [*Catholicism in Classical France 1610-1715*], S.E.D.E.S, Paris 1980, Volume 1, Chap. VII: “La pastorale caritative” [“Charitable Pastoral Care”].

[2.1.] The experience in Folleville

The first experience is related to the sermon that Vincent, at the insistence of Madame de Gondi, Marguerite de Silly, the wife of Philippe Emmanuel de Gondi, preached in Folleville. Vincent himself explained what occurred on the unforgettable January 25, 1617: *That took place in the month of January 1617, and, on the twenty-fifth, the feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul, that lady asked me to preach a sermon in the church of Folleville to urge the people to make a general confession, which I did, pointing out to them its importance and usefulness. Then I taught them how to make it properly; and God had such regard for the confidence and good faith of that lady – for the large number and enormity of my sins would have hindered the success of this act – that He blessed what I said; and those good people were so moved by God that they all came to make their general confession ... That was the first sermon of the Mission and the success God gave it on the feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul, and He certainly had a plan in mind on that day* (CCD:XI:3-4).

The enlightenment of his priestly vocation was crucial with regard to his missionary life. It was at that time Vincent became aware of the reality that henceforward he ought to dedicate his life to evangelization of the poor country people. Here I refer to the insight of the Vincentian historian, José María Román: *It was a revelation. Vincent decided this must be his mission; this was what God was calling him to, he was to take the gospel to these poor country people. He did not found any congregation that day. Perhaps the idea of forming one never entered his head. He just preached a sermon, “the first sermon of the Mission.” Eight years were to pass before he set up the Congregation of the Mission and yet throughout his life he would have his missionaries celebrate January 25th as the birthday of the company.*⁴

⁴ J. M. Román, *St. Vincent de Paul: A Biography*, translated by Sister Joyce Howard, DC, Melisende, London, 1999, p.115.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the author of *An Abridgement of the Course of Meditations* affirmed this tradition and stated: *each January 25th reminds us of our humble beginning*. The meditation concludes with the following words: *This is the Lord's doing and it is wonderful in our eyes* (Psalm 118:23).⁵

When the Constitutions and Statutes of the Congregation were approved in 1984, the book of meditations was no longer used because its method was viewed as inadequate. It must be stated, however, that Vincent never viewed himself as the Founder of the Congregation. In a conference to the Missionaries Vincent stated, *I ask you, who has established the Company? Who has set us to work in the missions, or with those preparing for ordination, or the conferences, or retreats, etc.? Is it I? No way! Is it M. Portail, whom God associated with me from the beginning? Not at all, for we weren't thinking of all that and had made no plan for it. So then, who is the author of all that? It's God. It's His paternal Providence and sheer goodness* (CCD:XI:31).

[2.2.] The experience in Châtillon

The second experience is related to Vincent's pastoral activity in Châtillon-les-Dombes on Sunday, August 20, of the same year 1617. That day he received a complementary enlightenment to the one he had received in Gannes-Folleville: the first Confraternity of Charity was established. Once again let us listen to Vincent's words about this event: *I, though unworthy, was Pastor of a small parish. As I was about to give the sermon, someone came to tell me there was an indigent man who was sick and very badly lodged in a poor barn. I was informed of his illness and poverty in such terms that, moved by compassion, I made a strong plea, speaking with such feeling that all*

⁵ A priest of the Congregation, *An Abridgement of the Course of Meditations for Every Day of the Year*, Eastern and Western Provinces of the United States, 1958, p.476.

the ladies were touched by it. More than fifty of them set out from the town, and I did the same. When I visited him, I found him in such a state that I judged it wise to hear his confession. As I was taking the Blessed Sacrament to him, I met the ladies returning in droves, and God gave me this thought: 'Couldn't these good ladies be brought together and encouraged to give themselves to God to serve the sick poor?' ... After dinner a meeting was held in the home of a good townswoman to see what help could be given them, and everyone present felt urged to go to visit them, console them with their words, and do what they could to help them. After Vespers, I took with me an upright citizen of the town, and we set out together to go there. Along the way, we met some women who had gone before us and, a little farther on, we met others who were returning home. Since it was summertime and the weather was very hot, those good ladies were sitting by the side of the road to rest and refresh themselves ... and that's the first place where the Confraternity of Charity was established (CCD:IX:165-166, 192-193).

These are the precise details concerning the events that occurred in 1617 in Folleville and in Châtillon, details that can be amplified in light of the civil, political, and religious situation of France at the beginning of the 17th century. It has often been said that the 17th century was the golden era in France because of the many works and distinguished individuals renowned for their knowledge and holiness.

As is well known, the Daughters of Charity came into existence through the Confraternities of Charity. Vincent, however, did not consider himself a Founder of that work: *And that, dear Sisters, is how God brought this work into being [that is, the Company of the Daughters of Charity]. Mademoiselle never thought of it, neither did I, nor did M. Portail, nor that poor young woman either [Marguerite Naseau] ... it's God himself who has done it. Who gave the spirit to the poor Daughters of Charity ... so it's from Him. Never forget that human beings didn't do it, but God (CCD:IX:473).*

The year 1633 was the year in which the charism of Vincent de Paul was made manifest. On January 12th, the Congregation of the Mission was approved by Pope Urban VII through the promulgation of the Bull, *Salvatoris Nostri*. In July of that year, the Tuesday Conferences were initiated and some of the most distinguished members of the clergy became part of this group. On November 29th, because of some very clear failings of the Confraternities of Charity, the first community of the Daughters of Charity was established. Mademoiselle LeGras, Louise de Marillac, took on the responsibility of forming this group of women.

[3] Elements that accompany the charism

To know the Vincentian charism better, one can do nothing more beneficial than review the group of factors that go with it. All these elements combined and blended express, concretize, and configure a community approved by the Church.

[3.1] The area of Mission or Action

The specific task of Vincent de Paul and of his congregations was developed around the evangelization of the poor. For the whole Vincentian Family, the poor are our reason for being and our mission. The poor explain its vocation and its dedication to the mission in the Church and in the world in imitation of Jesus Christ: *Our Lord asks us to evangelize the poor; that's what He did and what He wants to continue to do through us. We have great reason to humble ourselves here, seeing that the Eternal Father is using us for the plans of his Son, who came to preach the Gospel to poor persons, giving this as a sign that He was the Son of God and that the long-awaited Messiah had come ... One important reason we have for this, then, is the dignity of the matter: to make God known to poor persons; to announce Jesus Christ to them; to tell them that the kingdom of God is at hand and that it's for persons who are poor. Oh, what a great thing that is!* (CCD: XII: 71).

The mission was given to our Founder to be carried out not just by him, but also by a group of persons who would form a community based on the living out of the same charism and the same service to the Church. The charism is not an individual gift, but rather a social one. Thus, it may be transmittable and lasting. This charism or grace and the mission linked to it suppose a vocation from God. God calls, in effect, the founder and all those who are to be graced with the participation in the same charism.

The first and principal work of the Congregation of the Mission was the popular missions, which in a short time called for foreign missions. Sometime later the field of work widened and included the direction of seminaries. It is a question, more than of one concrete work, of responding to the needs of the Church. In effect, the original apostolic commitment spilled over into other works sealed by urgent charity. And so, the Founder would say: *They were given to us either by those who have authority to do so, or from sheer necessity; that's how God involved us in these plans. Thus, everyone thinks this Company is from God because people see that it hastens to the relief of the most pressing and neglected needs* (CCD: XII: 80).

In brief, then, *poor persons are our portion, the poor... 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, who avoided the towns and went to the country to seek out those who were poor. That's what our Rules engage us to do, to help poor persons, our lords and masters* (CCD: XII: 4). This help to the poor was intended to remedy every kind of corporal and spiritual necessity. *We [are] to run to the spiritual needs of our neighbor as if we were running to a fire* (CCD: XI: 25).

In 1654 Vincent wrote to a priest of the Mission ministering in the popular missions with great nostalgia for his former work: *I cannot restrain myself and must tell you quite simply that this gives*

me renewed, greater desires to be able, in the midst of my petty infirmities, to go and finish my life near a bush, working in some village. I think I would be very happy to do so, if God were pleased to grant me this grace (CCD: V: 204).

In a similar manner, Vincent explained service to the poor to the Ladies of Charity and the Daughters of Charity. To the latter he said: *Married persons and servants are filled with concerns and dissatisfaction; and the pleasure they may have can't be compared to the pleasure and consolation of a Sister of Charity who serves those who are poor.... I confess that I never had greater consolation than when I had the honor of serving the poor.... 'Man is happy' to practice charity (CCD: X: 546).*

The cry of the poor roused the zeal of the Founder, who exclaimed in November of 1657: *I remember ... when I'd come back from giving a mission, it seemed to me that, when I reached Paris, the gates of the city were going to fall upon and crush me; and seldom did I return from a mission without that thought coming to my mind."* (CCD: XI: 391).

It was to this same cry of the poor that Paul VI appealed to spur on the missionary zeal: *You hear rising up, more pressing than ever, from their personal distress and collective misery, "the cry of the poor." Was it not in order to respond to their appeal as God's privileged ones that Christ came, even going as far as to identify Himself with them (Evangelica Testificatio, #17).*

The great French orator Jacques Bossuet, a member of the Tuesday Conferences and a friend of Saint Vincent, inspired by the words and works of the holy Founder, developed a famous sermon in three points in which he tried to prove "*the eminent dignity of the poor in the Church*" (cf. *Sermons choisis de Bossuet, Sur l'éminente dignite des pauvres dans l'église [Selected Sermons of Bossuet, On the Eminent Dignity of the Poor in the Church]*, Garnier Frères, Paris).

It is not surprising that another great friend of his, Bishop Henri Maupas de Tour, exalted the deceased Vincent de Paul in the funeral sermon he pronounced on November 23, 1660, in the Church of Saint Germain l'Auxerrois in Paris, for his dedication to the temporal and eternal salvation of the poor, saying: *He all but changed the face of the Church* (Oraison funèbre à la mémoire de feu Messire Vincent de Paul [Funeral Oration to the Memory of the Late Monsieur Vincent de Paul]).

François-Marie Arouet, better known as Voltaire (1694-1778) somewhat later than Saint Vincent in time, said of him: *My saint is Vincent de Paul, the patron of the founders. He has earned the praise as much of philosophers as of Christians.* (Oeuvres Complètes, T.44, Garnier, Paris, 1885, pp.167-168).

[3.2.] Spirituality

As a means of perseverance and fidelity to the evangelization of the poor, the Founder of Mission and Charity made use of a body of spiritual doctrine, which was his own nourishment and support and that of his community. Certainly the term “spirituality” was never used by the saint, and neither was “charism.” Between mission and spirituality there exists a bond that is impossible to break. The Founder had to dedicate time to assimilate a spirituality that was distinctly evangelical, adapted to the nature of Mission and Charity, as shown by his interventions before the Ladies of Charity (1628), before the Missionaries of the Congregation (1632), and the Daughters of Charity (1634), although the chronology of these documents and of his correspondence was a few years earlier. Vincent de Paul would have the gospel as his ensign and the rule of a life given over to the evangelization of the poor, although on some occasions he also made use of teachings taken from the Holy Fathers, theologians, and writers on the spiritual life.

Vincentian spirituality, which will be forged and take on its own body and form with the passage of the years, is centered on Jesus

Christ, the Missionary of the Father and the Evangelizer of the Poor. Its experience and the living out of it are explained by the way of knowing, understanding, feeling, and living the mystery of *Jesus Christ, the Rule of the Mission* (cf. CCD: XII: 110).

With great affection, he said to his first companion in the Mission, Father Antoine Portail in 1635: *Remember, Monsieur, we live in Jesus Christ through the death of Jesus Christ, and we must die in Jesus Christ through the life of Jesus Christ, and our life must be hidden in Jesus Christ and filled with Jesus Christ; and in order to die as Jesus Christ, we must live as Jesus Christ.* (CCD: I: 276).

Saint Vincent begins to explain to his disciples just what the spirit is from which his spirituality is derived and which should animate the missionaries as those who continue the mission of Jesus Christ by telling them of the *love and reverence towards the Father, compassionate and effective love for the poor, and docility to divine providence.* (Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission, #6). In the moment of handing over the Common Rules to the Missionaries in 1658, the Spirit had gifted him with a rich spiritual and apostolic experience. As can be seen, the spirituality of the Founder is somewhat subjective as a way of possessing in time and space what the charism implied. Since it is the Church which places its seal on the institutionalization of the charism, it is important to see the charism and the institution as two aspects of one and the same reality.

Vincentian spirituality, extracted from the gospel of Jesus Christ, also has another source of inspiration: the poor. St. Vincent used to say: *What I retain from my experience of this is the judgement I've always made that true religion – true religion, Messieurs, true religion – is found among the poor. God enriches them with a lively faith; they believe, they touch, they taste the words of life. You never see them in their illnesses, troubles, and food shortages get carried away with impatience, or murmur and complain; not at all – or rarely* (CCD: XII: 142).

From what has been said one can gather that three loves, melded into one, constitute the spirituality of Saint Vincent: Jesus Christ, the Church, and the poor.

[3.3.] The Nature or Characteristic Style

If between the mission and the spirituality there exists an unbreakable bond, we affirm something similar about the spirituality and the nature or characteristic style of those called by Jesus to serve in Mission and Charity. Vincentian spirituality revolves around putting on the spirit of Jesus: simple, humble, gentle, mortified, and filled with zeal for the salvation of people.

Attentive to the doctrine of the Church, we transcribe the decree *Mutuae Relationes*: “*The very charism of the Founders appears as an “experience of the Spirit,” transmitted to their disciples to be lived, safeguarded, deepened and constantly developed by them, in harmony with the Body of Christ continually in the process of growth.... This distinctive character also involves a particular style of sanctification and of apostolate, which creates its particular tradition, with the result that one can readily perceive its objective elements”* (MR 11).

The particular style of sanctification and apostolate of the Vincentian Family calls for the practice of these five apostolic virtues that constitute the spirit of the Mission: simplicity, humility, gentleness, mortification, and zeal for the salvation of humanity. History records these features of the way of being and acting by which they have made themselves known. Never has the charism of the Founder been so talked about as it is now. Would this be, perhaps, because the spirit of the world is trying to drown the nature and characteristic style that identify the Congregation? If the Vincentian community went so far as to forget its characteristic style, it would lose its identity and its force of attraction. The example of life and spirit is the best recommendation and the most effective invitation to bring others to embrace our missionary vocation.

The advice given in the letter of May 2, 1660, to Father Pierre de Beaumont, superior of Richelieu, is valid for a whole vocational program. *We have a maxim ... never to urge anyone to embrace our state. It is for God alone to choose those whom He wishes to call to it, and we are sure that one Missionary given by His fatherly hand will do more by himself than many others who would not have a true vocation. It is up to us to ask Him to send good workers into His harvest and to live so well that we will give them, by our example, an attraction rather than a distaste for working with us* (CCD: VIII: 342).

[3.4.] The Group of Disciples

The individual and community style of life lived with an apostolic spirit raises up in a contagious manner disciples of Saint Vincent to live our way of life. The testimony cited above from Brother Ducourneau to which we add that of Bossuet: “We listened avidly to his words” (*Letter to Pope Clement XI seeking the beatification of Vincent de Paul*) speaks to us of the group of disciples that associated themselves with Mission and Charity. The example and vocation of Vincent de Paul attracted men and women disciples to his work in an irresistible way.

The process began by itself, without publicity, but with joyful dedication to the following of Jesus, the evangelizer of the poor. As far as the missionaries are concerned, we know that the first three signed an act of association (cf. CCD: XIIIa: 222-223), installing themselves in Bons Enfants College (1624), attracted by their teacher. Once they were established in Saint Lazare Abbey in 1632, the number of missionaries grew unceasingly. The following year, 1633, Pope Urban VII approved the Congregation of the Mission, thus giving a new impulse to the fledgling Congregation.

It is indisputable that the dedication and the joyful spirit with which the Founder and his community lived fascinated other people who, in their turn, received the same spiritual and apostolic experience. He will exhort the Daughters of Charity to be living

examples, to guarantee the service to the poor, carried out with a spirit of *compassion, gentleness, cordiality, respect, and devotion*. Joy pervades those virtues springing from the direct love of: *Jesus, the source and model of all charity* (CCD: XIIIb: 151; Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity I, 1).

From 1617 onward, the Ladies or Confraternities of Charity, known today as the International Association of Charities, grew at a faster pace than the missionaries. The Founder will say to these good women: *Ladies ... Providence is turning today to some of you to supply what was lacking to the sick poor of the Hôtel-Dieu. They corresponded to God's plan, and soon after, when others joined the first ones, God established them as mothers of abandoned children ... Those good souls have responded to all that with zeal and firmness* (CCD:XIIIb:432).

[3.5.] Fidelity to the Charism of the Founder

The insistence on fidelity impresses any observer of the history of the Church and of its congregations, for the specific charismatic note of any institute demands, both of the Founder and of his disciples, a continual examination regarding fidelity to the Lord; docility to His Spirit; intelligent attention to circumstances and an outlook cautiously directed to the signs of the times; the will to be part of the Church; the awareness of subordination to the sacred hierarchy; boldness of initiatives; constancy in the giving of self; humility in bearing with adversities. The true relation between genuine charism, with its perspectives of newness, and interior suffering, carries with it an unvarying history of the connection between charism and cross (MR, #12).

Fidelity goes beyond the limits of perseverance and places its accent on love and joy in the fraternal life and in the service of the poor in whom one must discover the suffering Jesus Christ. There can be no fidelity to the charism without progress, nor progress without fidelity to the foundational charism. A fidelity that does not update its basic inspirations leads the community to death.

The post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* insists above all on fidelity to the charism. This simple observation should make us reflect on the responsibility that falls upon those called to Mission and Charity. Vocational work insists on the importance of both personal and community witness, because the former are not sufficient without the latter.

We have come to a state of indifference in the face of so many broken commitments. Absences at scheduled community exercises like community prayer and work promote the dissolution of the community, for permanence does not come in an unreflective way or through arbitrary formulae, but rather by means of dynamic fidelity.

The fear that the Congregation might be unfaithful to its apostolic and spiritual commitments led Vincent to ask the Lord: *Two or three times every day I ask God to destroy us if we're not useful for His glory* (CCD: XI :2). He had a clear consciousness that the community was useful only to the degree that it remained faithful to its foundational spirit and charism.

CONCLUSION

From what we have said we can conclude that the charism renews and invigorates itself throughout one's life, especially from the moment we say "Yes" to the Lord's call to follow him wherever he goes. In a particular way, the notes that usually accompany the charism testify to the authenticity of the very charism approved by the Church. It pertains to the Church to verify if the charism is a true good for the faithful and for the Church itself. In the case of the Congregation of the Mission, its approbation by Pope Urban VIII in 1633 is clear. From that time onward, the Founder began to set out for his disciples a spirituality that confirms and demonstrates the charism received.

The approval of the Company of the Daughters of Charity by the Holy See also confirms it, even though this was delayed until 1668, eight years after the death of the Holy Founders. At that time, Father René Alméras was the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission and of the Daughters of Charity (1661-1672).

Translated: Joseph Cummins, CM and
Charles Plock, CM