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Theme:

Let us revitalize our Vincentian identity:
Community and pastoral conversions

The theme of our meditation is “revitalizing our Vincentian identity: community and pastoral conversions.” The theme is reformulated as current imperative, which commits all to revitalizing our Vincentian being, both on an individual, community level as well as a pastoral one. Revitalizing our Vincentian identity requires that we review our disposition to service of the poor and our community life. In order to submerge ourselves in this meditation, we ask the following question: How do we as Vincentians serve the poor today and what individual and community strategies should we employ so as to maintain both the social context and our spirituality?

I- Revitalization of our Vincentian identity and the question of our human and Vincentian responsibility.

1. A Call to a humanizing charity of the poor «our lords and masters»

“The humanization” (of the poor) means a dynamism which leads to a change of the situation (of the poor), which is initially that of poverty to a final position of action. The poor person should leave his situation so as to become more human, or at least, to “live better.” Or said in another way, to be in an acceptable human situation which also obliges us to be “human”.

Our service as Vincentians must lead to a change in the way of life. For some time in the Congregation of the Mission we speak of “Systemic change.” The content of this project is a good clue for the revitalization of our Vincentian identity. In some way it is a new ethical vision of the Vincentian Charism. Paul Ricoeur defines ethics, in *Oneself like Any Other, as a look at true life with and for others in just institutions*.¹

True life with and for the other disposes us to a consideration of the human person. E. Mounier in *Personalism* makes the human person precede his own existence (“*I exist to the extent that I only exist for the other to the limit of being, this is loving*”). It is about “creating

¹ Soi-même comme un autre, Paris Seuil, 1990, p. 211.

with others a society of persons whose structures, customs, sentiments and, finally, institutions are marked by their nature of persons".² This axis of humanization invites us to re-integrate our approach to the poor, putting in practice our charism.

2.- Revitalization of our charism

Vincentian service of the poor is done in very special ways: through the use of virtues. Love of neighbor is a virtuous love. We know very well the Vincentian virtues which guide our service of the poor: simplicity, humility, meekness, mortification and zeal. The use which Saint Vincent makes of the virtues in the service of the poor is **essential** (I mean essential and not accidental). In the service of the poor, enlightened by the evangelical counsels, we distinguish ourselves from others; we give a sense of identity to our charity. To serve humanity, God has come down (**humiliated**) even accepting death on the cross. He lived a very ordinary life among simple people (**simplicity**). Facing the violence of the Jews, he kept a holy calm (**meekness**). With faith and hope He endured the mistreatment of men for our salvation (**mortification**). Because the love of men so encouraged him, he gave himself totally to his mission (zeal).

By way of conclusion to this aspect of revitalization, we can say simply that the revitalization of our Vincentian identity should go through a revision of our closeness to the poor and the question of fraternity. Are we truly fraternal? On what do we base our relations of fraternity and cofraternity? These questions open us to consider the themes of community and pastoral conversion.

II. The Imperative of Community and Pastoral Conversion.

The community is made up of persons. To speak of community conversion presupposes an individual conversion. Conversion is a challenge "to turn to others." *Evangelii Gaudium* presents ecclesial conversion as an opening to a permanent reform of one's self by fidelity to Jesus Christ. Pope Francis in his Exhortation affirms citing Vatican II: *All renewal in the Church consists essentially in an increase in fidelity to one's vocation (...) Christ calls the pilgrim Church to a perennial reformation from which the Church itself, as a human and earthly institution, has continual need* (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 26).

² Emmanuel Mounier, *Le personalisme*, Paris, PUF, («Que sais-je», n. 395, p. 39.

1. Community and pastoral conversión.

Mission and community are two characteristic poles of our Vincentian identity. We often say following Saint Vincent that we “are in community for the mission.” We are not in community to contemplate ourselves, to look at ourselves, but rather as saint Exupèry would say, “**to look in the same direction**” and our direction is the call of the poor, of the unfortunate. Mission is our focal point, common end, the reason of our being together. Therefore conversion here consists of returning to this identifying element in our common life for the mission. Sometimes we change the scale of values, and Community becomes as was said a place of transition and not in a place of life.

The inspiration of Saint Vincent insisting in community for the mission comes from Jesus himself. He has not regrouped missionaries, but rather has called brothers men to send them on mission: “*You have not chosen me, I have chosen you and destined you to go and bear fruit and your fruit remain*” (Jn 15,16).

Community conversion begins by becoming aware of our fragility, to understand that we live with dysfunctional norms, which supposedly guide our lives. You can lead a relaxing and pleasant life, but not according to our community and Vincentian ideal. Here conversion returns by assuming our ideal of community life, taking into consideration others, our norms and our community projects. Sometimes our community projects are purely formal. Community conversion should lead us to community commitments. Conversion should not be only structural but also mental and behavioral. Community conversion should lead us to put in practice fraternity and solidarity, **because from the sanctity of community life flows the sanctity of the pastoral activity.**

It must be said that testimony of life is one of the keys to proclaiming the Good News. This is what *Evangelii Nuntiandi* tells us: “*The Good News should be proclaimed in first place by witness. Let us suppose that a Christian or group of Christians who, within the human community where they live, show their capacity for understanding and acceptance, their communion of life and destiny with others, their solidarity in the endeavors of all that is noble and good. Let us also suppose that they irradiate in a simple and spontaneous way their faith in the values, which go beyond common values, and their hope in something that is neither seen nor dared to dream. Through this testimony without words, these Christians make those who contemplate their lives to raise irresistible questions: Why are they like that? Why do they live in this way? What or who is it who inspires them? Why are they with us? Well then this testimony constitutes already in itself a silent but also a clear and effective proclamation of the Good News*” (EN. 21).

What the Church wants to say to us is that our communities always have the need to be evangelized if they want to maintain their vigor and strength to announce the Gospel. Vatican Council II recalled and the 1974 Synod reaffirmed with force the

theme of the Church that evangelizes in a conversion and a constant renewal in order to evangelize the world with credibility. In other words, *to be evangelizers* we ought to be *evangelized communities*.

Missionary or pastoral conversion according to *Evangelii Gaudium* is a demand of "continual renewal" that we find in our Constitutions: "*The Congregation of the Mission, attentive always to the Gospel, to the signs of the times and to the most urgent petitions of the Church, will endeavor to open new paths and apply practices adopted to the circumstances of time and place. Also it will strive to judge and organize the works and ministries, remaining always in a state of continual renewal*"(C.2). In the final instance, there is no pastoral work without interior conversion nor solidarity.

2. Organic pastoral solidarity.

Pastoral conversion ought to be expressed in an openness to collaboration and solidarity. To be capable of doing with others (others here means both confreres and faithful). Avoid what is called here *the 'I'ism (I am the...)*. *Ecclesia in Africa* speaking of the Church family wants to suggest that the Church ought to organize itself in a collegial manner, but in strict respect of the ecclesial structure. In effect, the image of family puts the accent on the attention of the other, solidarity, the warmth of relations, reception, dialogue and confidence. *Africae Munus* returned to when it spoke of "*organic pastoral solidarity*." We take note that solidarity is the guarantee of justice and peace, of unity, so that the abundance of some makes up for the lack of others. The principle of subsidiarity must be put in to practice in our communities, parishes and structures.

Conclusion

The revitalization of our Vincentian identity consists in revising our vows, our evangelical councils and above all our way of serving the poor (discovering the face of God in the other, EG 91) just as community and pastoral conversations will allow us to purify ourselves and differentiate ourselves from false apprehensions of the mission³.

The revitalization of our identity allows us to face the missionary, pastoral and community challenges by avoiding dangers such as:

- ◆ **Practical relativism** (very close to secularism) which consists in acting as though God does not exist.

- ◆ **Selfish acidity**, or indiscreet zeal (the untimely and ill-clarified zeal, to recuperate a confrere).

³ The *Instrumentum Laboris* of the General Assembly 2022 invites us to reread our Constitutions Nos. 19 to 27.

♦**Mundane spirituality**, which manifests itself in religious and spiritual appearances that, rather than seek the glory of God, look for personal glory and personal benefit.

Translated by John Carney, C.M.