

REVITALIZE OUR COMMUNITY LIFE

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Voltaire's words with regard to religious life are well known: they are men *who come together without knowing one another, live without loving, and die without crying over one another*. Yes, this French philosopher is speaking specifically about the life of monks¹, but his underlying criticism is an expression of his own understanding of communities of religious men. Is there perhaps some truth behind those words?

At first glance, we might take a defensive position and therefore, in light of such an insult by an staunch accuser of the Church, we *shake the dust from our feet*. Nevertheless, in the context of the General Assembly that invites us to revitalize our identity in all its dimensions, it is most opportune to evaluate the community dimension of our life². In place of Voltaire's words, could we substitute the words of our Constitutions and state that in the Congregation of the Mission there is an environment in which the confreres "*like good friends*", *join reverence for one another with genuine esteem* (Constitutions, #25.1)?

In order to approach this theme in a healthy manner, we must adopt the perspective of the *Instrumentum Laboris* which states that community life is an important means for the Congregation of the Mission but is not an end in itself (... such a statement one might find in the theology of religious life). Furthermore, it might be helpful to clearly outline the role of the common life in Societies of Apostolic Life and distinguish that role from that of Religious Institutes:

Even though there are similarities, there are distinguishing elements. The very nature of its apostolic life (mobility, commitment) gives the community life of societies of apostolic life specific characteristics. In religious institutes fraternal life is, above all else "the vitalization of communion which grounds the church and offers a prophetic vision of the unity to which it tends as its ultimate goal". On the other hand, in a society of apostolic life it is its apostolic mission that demands a common life and that determines its form. In religious institutes the fraternal life in common is all the more rigorous the less dedicated the members are to the work of the apostolate. In societies of apostolic life, it is the opposite. The common life is a witness of new life, of a new fraternity that is lived in the divine filiation and of the

¹ In the original French the complete phrase reads: *La vie monacale, quoi qu'on en dise, n'est point du tout à envier. C'est une maxime assez connue que les moines sont des gens qui s'assemblent sans se connaître, vivent sans s'aimer, et meurent sans se regretter.* VOLTAIRE. *L'homme aux quarante écus*. Versión PDF. In English: *The life of the monks, no matter what they may say, is not at all to be envied. It is a maxim well known that the monks are a kind of people who come together without knowing one another, live without loving, and die without crying over each other* (https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Man_of_Forty_Crowns).

² The *Instrumentum Laboris* refers to three dimensions that sustain our identity: mysticism (referred to as "spirituality"), mission (referred to as "ministries") and finally community which characterizes our lifestyle and which will be the focus of this article.

*common vocation. In the societies of apostolic life, the common life highlights the unity that ought to exist among the apostles as participants in a common mission*³.

Current challenges of community life

It has always been easier to blame the dead. Thus, we state that individuals such as Descartes (1596-1650), the father of modern rationalism, or the English empiricists, such as John Locke (1632-1704) and Francis Bacon (1561-1626), or perhaps any of the German idealists⁴, are responsible for the misfortunes of an individualistic culture that has created men and women incapable of living a common life that at one time had as its model the peasant organization that was highly valued by Saint Vincent⁵.

Indeed, we know that the excessive categorization of some aspects of the human being as objects of study which became the focus of the human sciences and later, the exact sciences ... we know that this categorization generated countless partial anthropologies, all of them defending some human principles but incapable of understanding the person in its entirety. This gave rise to an increasingly partial, more individual sense of the person, a subject that seemed more and more like a faceless object, and that was favored by the effects of the Industrial Revolution that began in the second half of the 17th century and that led to the consumer-discard culture that capitalism has managed to crown in this current globalized world.

Even though in many ecclesial circles there has been an attempt to promote a more personalistic anthropology (that has many similarities to a Christian anthropology), it must be recognized that at this time of the 21st century, the missionaries of the Congregation of the Mission have many of the features of individualism, often sheltered under the *newness* of the Second Vatican Council with regard to a movement that decentralized structures as guarantors of vocational fidelity and put the human person in their place. Thus, with such invocation, the noblest missionary initiative can be justified, as well as the most absurd contradictions to the vocation of those who have chosen to live in a community for the cause of the mission.

A reflection of this is seen in the fact that a significant number of missionaries are experiencing problems with regard to stability and many of these confreres blame community circumstances as the cause of their situation. For example, between 2010 and 2016, forty-three confreres left the Congregation and incardinated themselves in a diocese. The problem is not new and was clearly revealed when more than 600 priests⁶ left the Congregation in the years immediately following the Second Vatican Council.

³Teodoro Bahillo Ruíz, "Significado de las Sociedades de la Vida Apostólica en la Iglesia" [Significance of the Societies of Apostolic Life in the Church] in *Vincenianism y Vida Consagrada: XXXIX Semana de Estudios Vincenianos* [Vincentians and Consecrated Life: XXXIX Week of Vincentian Studies, Editorial CEME, Salamanca, 2015, p. 122-123.

⁴ Among them we mentioned here: Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Friedrich Schelling (1775-1854), Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814).

⁵*It is among them, among those poor people that true religion and a living faith are preserved; they believe simply, without dissecting everything; they submit to orders and are patient amid the abject poverty they have to suffer as long as it pleases God, some from the wars, others from working all day long in the great heat of the sun; poor vine dressers, who give us their labor, who expect us to pray for them while they wear themselves out to feed us!* (CCD:XI:190).

⁶ *Between the years 1968-1986, in a legal manner, 632 priests, 42 brothers, and 205 students left the Congregation ... in an illegal manner 199 confreres (5 of whom were brothers) left the Congregation;* Miguel Perez Flores, *Revestirse*

In 1985, Father McCullen, Superior General, sent a questionnaire to the Visitors and their respective Provincial Councils. Among the questions was the following: What are the reasons [that a confrere expresses] for leaving the Congregation of the Mission and going to a diocese? The responses indicated that the primary cause was the difficulties in exercising ministry within the community⁷.

More than thirty-five years later, the challenge to revitalize the Vincentian community is viewed from the perspective of clarifying the identity of our community for the mission without reductionisms in the name of “supposed renewal” (that rather distort our vocation), or false fidelities to the founder (that seem rather to want to embalm a mummy). This challenge leads us to the essence of our being and makes us ask questions about the meaning of community in an apostolic society like ours (understood from the perspective of an anthropology that humanizes us, as Christ does in the Gospels, and at the same time enables us to live the authentic meaning of *koinonia* as described in the Acts of the Apostles 2:42-47).

Therefore, to deepen our understanding of the challenge of community life, we must go to *the mind, the heart and the stomach*⁸ of the individuals called to follow Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor, because it is in community where one gives evidence to the vocational *consistencies*⁹ that allow men who are communally dedicated to the mission to live a full life, or on the contrary, where one gives evidence to those vocational *inconsistencies* that create frustrated individuals, perhaps hard-working individuals, but persons, as Voltaire stated, without life, without passion, and without love.

Community for the Mission

Vincent clarified the community spirit of the Little Company in the eighth chapter of the Common Rules. Inspired by the community of the Acts of the Apostles, Vincent presented a series of useful recommendations for the group that had existed for some three decades when it received its rule¹⁰.

Many years before, Vincent was very clear about the great value of community and, at the same time understood the primacy of the mission to which we had been called. Community life ought

del Espíritu de Cristo: Expresión de la Identidad Vicenciana [To clothe oneself in the Spirit of Christ: an expression of Vincentian identity], Editorial CEME, Salamanca, 1996, p. 404.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 405.

⁸ *Head, heart and stomach are the three faculties of the soul that others refer to as intelligence, feeling and will. One thinks with the head, feels with the heart and desires with the stomach. That is very clear! ...* Miguel Unamuno, *Niebla*, (Chapter XXIV) pdf.

⁹ *Among the dialectics that appear to be fundamental in a psycho-social anthropology of vocation are those that are defined as consistencies and inconsistencies. As we will immediately see, they are constituted as either being in accord with (consistent) or opposed to (inconsistent) the “Ideal-I” and the “Actual-I” ...* Luigi M. Rulla, Franco Imoda, Jocie Ridick, *Antropología de la Vocación Cristiana, 2, Confirmaciones Existenciales*, Sociedad de Educadores Atenas, Salamanca, 1994, p. 26.

¹⁰ Even though the Founder distributed the Rule in 1658, we know that as a result of the discovery of the *Codex Sarzana*, a finding made by Father Ángel Coppo who published his research in 1957 (*La prima stesura delle Regole e Costituzione della Congregazione della Missione*), that from at least 1653 the first outline of the Common Rules was already in Saint Vincent’s mind and included the theme of “community” under the title *De mutua nostrorum conversatione*.

to be, not only a support for the mission, but also ought to be an image of the Trinity since the missionaries engage in the process of evangelization in the manner of the Trinity:

How I wish we had this holy practice of finding everything good and that it might be said that in the Church of God there is a Company that professes to be closely united and never to say a bad word about the absent; that it might be said of the Mission that it is a Company that finds nothing to criticize in its confreres! Honestly, I would have a higher regard for that than all the missions, sermons, ministries with the ordinands, and every other blessing God has given the Company, since the image of the Most Holy Trinity would be imprinted more deeply upon us (CCD:XI:111).

Five years later, in a letter that Vincent wrote to M. Blatiron, we have this wonderful description of community life: we are not merely neighbors who live in the same house and are obliged to share certain spaces. Rather we are a family who can narrate a great missionary story as the result of our personal life ... each one has much to contribute to the project of Christ, the evangelizer of the poor and we complement one another in our mission:

O Divine Goodness, unite in this way all hearts in the Little Company of the Mission, then order whatever you please. Labor will be sweet to them and every task easy; the strong person will relieve the weak one, and the weak will cherish the strong and obtain increased strength for him from God. And so, Lord, your work will be done as you would like, for the building up of your Church, and your workers will multiply, attracted by the perfume of such charity (CCD:III:258).

This beautiful Vincentian theology must be understood when we speak about ourselves as living in *community for the mission*, especially at the beginning this fifth century of our history when we see the need to revitalize our identity.

Permanent formation for our life in common

Amedeo Cencini identifies three levels that progressively produce a formation itinerary for *fraternal communion*, namely, *the material, the affective and the spiritual*¹¹. It is an upward movement in which a group of people begin to share space and material resources, continues a process of affective sharing among them and concludes with sharing a spirituality that identifies the most profound life plan of those individuals.

The day we made a decision to enter a house of formation, we took on a new lifestyle. We allowed our time and our personal space to be “invaded” by others who share the same ideal: to follow Christ, the evangelizer of the poor. This call enables us to see *beyond* the materialistic culture that proposes the metaphor of a shopping mall as an ideal for life. This is the “*beyond*” that Vincent demands of the missionaries: *no one should use anything as though it were his own personal property* (Common Rules, III:5).

¹¹ Cf., Amedeo Cencini, *La Vida Fraternal: Reto y Marvilla; La Vida Fraternal y Nueva Evangelización* [The Fraternal Life: its challenges and marvels; The Fraternal Life and the New Evangelization], Ediciones Sígueme, Salamanca, 2011, pp. 219-261.

Yes, the Congregation of the Mission has its own Statute regarding the vow of poverty which outlines important differences that are not present in religious life. Nevertheless, beyond the legal minimums that we might defend in a pharisaic manner, there is a profound need of those who have been called to engage in the Vincentian mission: *it is not good for man to be alone* (Genesis 2:8). The missionary is not one who remains in the single state but has embraced becoming united with a mission that is lived in community. That is why we need to share, on a daily basis, at a common table, where meals, the fruit of our ministry, finances, limitations and everything else, is shared. When we abstain from participating on this first level, justifying that lack of participation with a thousand and one reasons, we often conclude by making many other concessions that are incompatible with our vocation. Thus, we can find ourselves in the situation in which we live a double lifestyle or fall into mediocrity and become frustrated or, even worse, become involved in scandalous situations.

The second level was identified by Vincent when he stated that *we should get along as good friends, always living in community* (Common Rules, VIII:2). Indeed, the community lifestyle of the Congregation of the Mission is not only a means that makes the mission possible, but also, to a large extent, it supports the missionary's life (like any other human being, the missionary is alive in his affections and so also is in need of giving and receiving human affection such that if the confrere does not find that affection in community, he will seek it outside the community). Those of us who are called to chastity cannot say that we are freed from commitment. On the contrary, we belong to God and this sense of belonging is manifested in a joyful community life in which time is shared and life is celebrated, in which we suffer with others in their moments of pain and in which we come to love one another. Through the experience of accompanying many young people in their process of vocational accompaniment, it is clear that this is one of the realities that will either most strongly attract or discourage vocations. In the twenty-first century, no one is willing to lead a life of missionary heroism paid with the price of loneliness in a cold and divided institution. That is a lie that is most evident at the present time and in fact, at no time has hell been known to be an attraction to anyone.

If the material and the effective levels have been assimilated correctly, then the third level will certainly not be understood as a matter of simply sharing times of prayer.

We can say that a community truly prays when in their prayer each one places the others before God and when the individuals allow themselves to be led by the common Father. It is not simply praying together... but allowing others to participate in our relationship with God and realizing that they are inescapably part of this relationship. We not only love others because we love God, but we love others because they are part of our personal relationship with God: we love the other in God¹².

In conclusion, the vocation to follow Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor, cannot be viewed from the perspective of individualism which betrays the missionary strength of a group of brothers who have the same purpose. This reality, being a community for the mission, will remain on the level of an ideal unless we put in place a permanent formation that begins with the material level and brings us to a situation in which we are not only members of a work team but *brothers who lovingly*

¹² Amedeo Cencini, *op.cit.*, p. 241.

care about one another and, finally, brothers of a family that proclaims God to the poor with the witness of a lifestyle that is characterized by those elements highlighted in the *Instrumentum Laboris* and in our Constitutions (#19-27): *team work, the service of authority, community projects, dialogue and communication, community discernment, witness, community life, the value of co-responsibility, fraternal correction, prayer life and spaces for community intimacy.*

For four centuries this has been the life of the Congregation of the Mission and therefore, not in vain are so many distinguished missionaries remembered with such great esteem in many parts of the world ... so many wonderful stories from companions on a common journey that *are known only by the Father who sees in secret* (Matthew 6:6). But we are witnesses and therefore, *what we have seen and heard, we proclaim now to you* (1John 1:3). Therefore, we can say: *Voltaire was wrong!*