

The Revitalization of Vincentian Spirituality

John P. Prager, CM

1617 has always been seen as the discovery of the Vincentian charism and the beginning of some of the early works for the evangelization of the poor. That year also marked the first steps to develop a Vincentian way of life and spirituality. A quick review of the conferences and letters of St. Vincent show his constant concern for aspects of a Vincentian spirituality. The Common Rules join that concern for spirituality to the end of the Congregation. The most recent Constitutions continue the link between spirituality and charism in the first chapter on our vocation.

Spirituality includes different elements. It has to do with our relationships with God and others. Those encounters lead to growth and transcendence. It is born in the charism as a way to live the gift of the Spirit. So Vincentian spirituality always has to be joined to the Charism.

Frequently we speak about the Vincentian charism as if it was a brilliant idea conjured up by St. Vincent. The charism is not a concept. Rather it is an experience of the Spirit. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit calling us to follow Jesus in a particular way. The Spirit invites us to walk with Jesus and he lights up the Gospel path, the way of the Kingdom of God. The Spirit creates the capacity to receive and live the gift. He never imposes. It has to be accepted in freedom.

Vincent spent a good part of his life fleeing from the charism. He did not want to accept the gift and closed his life to the movement of the Spirit. He made himself deaf and blind. His experiences with the poor opened his eyes in certain moments to their reality and to the presence of Jesus. But, in other moments, these experiences provoked fear, insecurity and doubts. Go with the poor? Abandon my plans? Is that what God wants? Is that what I want? How can I live this call? In the measure that he comes to open his life to the poor and discovers the charism, he begins to have a new experience of Jesus. It is no longer Jesus imposing a vocation from outside. It is the poor Jesus whom he discovers amidst the marginalized. He comes to see that following Christ among the poor is the road to liberation. God has saved him from a life closed up in selfishness. St. Vincent returns to the Gospels in order to understand his experience of Jesus. Texts like Luke 4 and Matthew 25 begin to speak in a fresh way. For the next thirty years he is going to highlight passages which speak about the love of God who saves the weak and the suffering. The following of Jesus teaches him new ways to relate with Jesus and with the poor, which will shape his spirituality.

The charism is mystery as it unfolds in history. It continually becomes incarnated in specific cultures and situations. No one - not even St. Vincent - can claim to have captured completely the consequences of accepting the gift of the Spirit. Little by little, the Spirit guides us to new ways of following Jesus, the evangelizer of the poor, in new realities. There have always been new revelations, new ideas and new styles of living the charism - even during St. Vincent's lifetime.

The dynamic unfolding of the meaning of the charism indicates the need to revitalize Vincentian Spirituality. Vincentian spirituality is not primarily concerned with repeating phrases from the founder. Nor is it simply updating customs, prayers or acts of piety from our past. Our spirituality is about following the poor Jesus who is encountered with the poor. A renewal of Vincentian spirituality is about breathing life into the way we live the charism.¹

Revitalization does not mean starting from nothing. The Vincentian tradition contains a richness of experiences which continue to have value. Nevertheless, it does mean evaluating those elements of

our past that may or may not enable us to follow Jesus, evangelizer of the poor, today. We cannot accept or reject what we have received from the past simply because it is old. We need a critical sense, rooted in the charism, which permits honest questions about Vincentian life. In a way the basic questions are: Does this way of expressing our spirituality enable us to encounter the poor Jesus? Does it foster a compassionate encounter with our brothers and sisters, the poor?

Revitalization is about change. Change provokes reactions, not all of which are pleasant: insecurity as we confront the unknown, a sense of loss when treasured ideas and practices are left behind, anger, fear, doubt. The mechanisms of defense which arise from these uncomfortable reactions to change impede renewal. We experienced this in the years after the Council. That human reaction has not disappeared. An uncritical acceptance of the past (Vincentian archeology as some have called it) stifles renewal. Closing our eyes to the signs of the times makes it impossible to follow Jesus, evangelizer of the poor in new directions. The Holy Spirit reveals new manifestations of the charism. If we try to understand those movements from our fears and insecurities, we will always misinterpret their meaning. We can betray the Vincentian charism by stubbornly and uncritically following its former expressions.

Renewal of Vincentian spirituality requires movement, changing ideas and new perspectives. Let me point out a few possible movements that might lead us to revitalization of our spiritual tradition:

1. A movement from spirituality as the road to perfection to spirituality as the road to charity

In the past there were reasons, theological and biblical, for considering spirituality as the road to perfection. St. Vincent uses that language frequently enough. But the saint knew that holiness is about love and that perfection can only be realized in charity.

The road to perfection, in practice, provoked spiritual and pastoral problems. For some it became a semi-pelagian idea of winning salvation by force of will or character. Grace became a prize to be earned by good behavior rather than God's free gift. Certain practices and actions were necessary to comply with God's demands. For others, perfectionism created a subtle pride in being better than others who were weak and sinful. For most, it meant faking the appearance of perfection. Of course, part of the problem was how do we understand a God who insists on perfection? How do we relate to the poor and the weak who are not perfect?

Vincentian spirituality is about relationships because the Gospel is about how we relate to God and others. Evangelization does not mean teaching more doctrines or handing on new laws. The Good News that Jesus announces to the poor, by word and deed, is that God is a father who loves us. The Gospel command is to be merciful like the father. Charity is not about works or projects. It is about encounter. How do we encounter Christ and how do we encounter the poor?

We need to ask honestly: Do our spiritual practices help us to discover Christ present on the margins of society? Does speaking about *seeing Christ in the poor* help us avoid seeing the poor? How can we be in solidarity with people we do not see or listen to? These are not just pastoral questions. They reach into the heart of our spirituality. We need to look at the elements of our spiritual tradition (vows, virtues, prayer) and ask: How can they help us encounter the poor Christ and our poor brothers and sisters?

2. A movement from a Vincentian piety to a Vincentian spirituality

A Vincentian piety is not the same as a Vincentian spirituality. Sometimes we confuse the two. Here, I mean piety in the sense of devotional practices, not the gift of the Holy Spirit. Exterior activities, certain prayers, practices and devotions have their place. But only to the degree that they express a deeper spirituality. Devotions are a means, not the end. The goal is not to repeat special words and actions. The sign of Vincentian spirituality is not faithful conformity to traditional acts of piety. Strong feelings and emotions are even less evidence of a Vincentian spirituality. St. Vincent clearly criticized mistaking fervor with spirituality. The popular quote about loving God *with the strength of our arm and the sweat of our brow* comes at the end of a conference where the saint raises questions about the desirability of fervor. *More of a problem than a help*, says St. Vincent.

Our spiritual practices have to enable us to relate with Jesus, the evangelizer of the poor and with our brothers and sisters. Pious practices can be a valuable expression of Vincentian spirituality. But they can also be an escape into fantasy. So we need to ask serious questions: Do they help us discover the presence of the Lord in the ugly situations where he accompanies the poor? Do they make us more sensitive to the poor? Do our devotions and prayers make us more compassionate?

3. The movement from pre-modern to post-modern values²

Saint Vincent expressed himself as a man of the Seventeenth Century. His sensitivities and ways of understanding always reflect the pre-modern society in which he lived. He passed on the charism along with many pre-modern values. We have not always paid attention to the cultural and historical limitations of what we received from the saint. Uncritically we have tried to repeat values and practices which are truly difficult to maintain in a post-modern world. (Uniformity, an overly hierarchical vision of obedience and authority, among other things, come to mind.) Our uncritical appropriation of the tradition has also hidden the presence of Nineteenth Century additions from our consciousness.

The pre-modern sensitivities were not just societal values. St. Vincent had a classical theological method, which is almost opposite to the way theology is done in the Twenty-first Century. The way he understand Christology, Ecclesiology, and Ministry colored some of his spiritual expressions. He looked to contemporary theologians to help him understand his experience of following Jesus, evangelizing the poor. Those spiritual masters did not give him the experience. They provided him with a theological filter to make sense of his own experience.

Revitalizing the spiritual tradition means including the post-modern values that concur with the Gospel. Like St. Vincent we need new theological guides that can help us understand the experience of following Jesus among the poor.

4. A movement from a unicultural to a multicultural expression of Vincentian spirituality

The Congregation of the Mission was essentially a European community until well into the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. Even outposts in Asia, America and Africa were mostly staffed by confreres from European countries. Logically the way Vincentian spirituality was understood, expressed and passed on reflected the origin of the missionaries.

Since Vatican II the Church has made great efforts to inculturate the Gospel. The documents of the Congregation reflect that shift to a world-wide ecclesial union. The **Constitutions and Statutes**, the **Instruction of Stability, Chastity, Poverty and Obedience** and the **Ratio Missionum** have all touched on the theme of inculturating the charism.

It should be remembered that inculturation is not folklore. Native handicrafts and music are only the surface of the culture. A movement to inculturate our spirituality is not just including a few local hymns into the liturgy. Culture is about how a people understands the world and relates to it. It includes values and disvalues, symbols and activities. Vincentian spirituality in these new contexts needs to be able to reflect on the values presented by the culture in the light of how they permit us to live the charism. If we expect to encounter Jesus present in different cultures and if we wish to insert ourselves in the reality of the poor, we need to think about culture, not just pastorally, but as a spiritual experience.

5. A movement from Religious Life to Apostolic Life³

St. Vincent always made it very clear that we do not belong to religious life. The new Constitutions state that we are not members of a Society of Consecrated Life, but belong to the Societies of Apostolic Life. Why that is important has not always been so clear. It is one of the least explored areas of the Constitutions. The influence of religious life has been so pervasive for so long we cease to ask questions about the effect on our lives. The expectation is that we are, for all practical purposes, religious. That understanding effects our spirituality.

A revitalized Vincentian spirituality has to be less monastic and more missionary. Mission does not mean going to foreign countries or even popular parish missions. It means leaving our own little world to enter the world of the poor. A missionary spirituality does not include bringing Christ to the poor. He precedes us. He is already present with the poor. Mission spirituality means discovering that presence along with the people. In another sense, it means living the Gospel in a new world, even if that world is not geographically distant.⁴

6. The Movement from Individualism to Community

There are moments in a spiritual life that invite us to solitude. Contemplatives in action means personal prayer. There are decisions about growth, evangelical holiness and service of the poor that require personal reflection and responsibility. There is a need for dialogue with the Lord that can only occur in silence.

The movement to community does not mean that we have to do everything together. Personal prayer, however, leads to union with others. First of all, it leads to union with the poor Jesus. Secondly, it produces new relationships with others: the confreres, the Vincentian Family and the poor. Community is about shared values, common vision and collaborative activity.

Conclusion

The revitalization of Vincentian spirituality is a crucial task for the Congregation of the Mission. It makes possible a renewal of the charism and our ministry. These six movements, although not completely new to us, might be taken up again as we prepare for the next General Assembly.

NOTES

¹ There have been many excellent studies on Vincentian spirituality in the past fifty years. I point out a few articles where I have touched on some of the themes in this presentation. Those articles also contain a bibliography in the notes.

Prager, JP. *Reflections on the renewal of Vincentian Spirituality* **Vincentiana** 1981;
<http://vincentians.com/en/reflections-on-the-renewal-of-vincentian-spirituality/>

Prager, JP. El carisma y la espiritualidad vicentinos y nuestro estilo de vivir **Clapvi** 2015; in English:
<https://vinformation.org/en/vincentian-formation-resources/presentations-media-games/podcast-of-the-vincentian-charism-vincentian-spirituality-and-our-way-of-life/>

Prager, JP. *La espiritualidad laical vicenciana* en **Laicado Vicenciano para el tercer milenio**, (Salamanca:Ceme, 2003).

² Fr. Maloney's two articles on the vows and the virtues seem to me to head in this direction:

Maloney, Robert, *The Five Characteristic Virtues: Yesterday and Today*, **Vincentiana**, 1985.

Maloney, Robert, *The Four Vincentian Vows: Yesterday and Today*, **Vincentiana**, 1990.

also in the book: **The Way of Vincent de Paul : a Contemporary Spirituality in the Service of the Poor**, (NY: New City Press, 1992)

³ Maloney, Robert, , *Spirituality of Societies of Apostolic Life*, **Vincentiana** (1997)

⁴ Prager, JP, *The Shadow Side of the Vincentian Mission*, **Vincentiana** (1995)