

The identity of the CM at the beginning of its fifth centenary

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The theme of identity often arises in our reflections and discussions. This is especially true in times of radical changes in the most diverse fields: anthropological, cultural, social, religious, ecclesial, etc. We are indeed living in a historical moment of significant uncertainties and instabilities. On the one hand, the global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the reality of a fractured world, causing insecurity to escalate in the present and into the future. On the other hand, this crisis has helped us to wake up to the need and urgency to return to the most essential aspects of life, to recover values that may have been forgotten, to rediscover principles and attitudes capable of humanizing the human being, enhancing relationships and recreating harmony in the Global Community. Pope Francis, with the clarity that characterizes him, knew how to remember this in that unforgettable prayer of March 27, 2020, in St. Peter's Square which was totally empty: "*The storm unmasks our vulnerability and exposes those false and superfluous securities with which we had built our agendas, our projects, routines and priorities. It shows us how we had left sleeping and abandoned what feeds, sustains and strengthens our life and our community.*"¹

Be that as it may, the astonishing and disconcerting nature of Cronos does not prevent us from recognizing the fruitfulness and promise of Kairos that is bounding our existential and historical horizon. The moment requires more constant prayer, deeper reflection, more attentive discernment, and bolder decisions. A good beginning can be to immerse ourselves in the theme of identity that constitutes us, since, without knowing who we are or what we are called to, we cannot live with meaning, act with enthusiasm, and speak with conviction. We would lack depth, consistency, and dynamism. The CM is challenged to walk this path of appropriation and reconfiguration of its spiritual and apostolic identity in the face of the challenges and calls of the present moment. It is a question, then, of listening to the voice of the Spirit who says to it: "*Hold fast to what you have, so that no one may take away your crown*" (Rev 3:11). The 43rd General Assembly is situated in this vein, inviting us to pray and reflect on the theme: We revitalize our identity at the beginning of the 5th centenary of the CM. To that end, Fr. Tomaž Mavrič exhorted us: "*Our next General Assembly will be held, God willing, 405 years after the God-inspired moment in Folleville. We need to thirst, aspire, and aim at nothing less than the inner fire and*

¹ La vida después de la pandemia. Vaticano: Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 2020, p. 21.

missionary zeal that led our first confreres to follow Jesus, the evangelizer of the poor. We need to strive for a new springtime, a new Pentecost."²

Within the limits imposed by the space available here, we will deal with the matter from three perspectives: we will present some methodological presuppositions of the Vincentian identity (I), we will recall its nuclear aspects (II) and we will touch upon some risks or tendencies that can deter us in the effort to update our identity (III). In all this, it is worth remembering that the revitalization of the identity of the CM requires and integrates the personal, communal and institutional (Province and Congregation in general) spheres, since every structural change has its starting point in the life of those who intuit its necessity and promote it with integrity and hope.

I - Three presuppositions of Vincentian identity

It is convenient to start by clarifying the issue of identity, its meaning and scope. We will look at three presuppositions that find support in the experience of St. Vincent de Paul himself, who made a commendable effort to define the profile of his foundations.

1. Identity is the visible manifestation of that which essentially constitutes us, it is the historical realization of what we are called to be. Using a thought-provoking image from St. Vincent himself, we could say that identity is analogous to the face, "*which is a witness of the heart*" (ES IX-A, 398|SV IX, 435)³. The founder said, on another occasion, using the same image: "*Faces are signs of the disposition of the heart, since, ordinarily, they give witness to what is within*" (ES IX-B, 892|SV IX, 304)⁴. He applies the same logic in explaining the virtues that define the spirit of the Daughters of Charity: "*Whoever sees you must recognize you by those virtues*" (ES IX-A, 537|SV IX, 596)⁵. In other words, the intentions, feelings and dispositions that we harbor within us are reflected in the exteriority of our conduct, in our words and actions, in our choices and commitments. Thus, identity distinguishes us from others, enhancing and making our characteristic features evident. Like all spiritual and apostolic identities, the Vincentian identity has a double structure: interior or charismatic, which is centered on a foundational experience, that of the encounter with Jesus Christ, Evangelizer of the poor, from which flow values, convictions and motivations; and exterior or prophetic, which translates into a way of being and acting, in a lifestyle markedly charitable and missionary. The founder knew how to make this explicit by outlining the physiognomy of the CM with these words: "What is

² Letter from the Superior General, January 25, 2020. The 43rd General Assembly of the CM will take place between 27 June and 15 July 2022.

³ Conference on the spirit of the world, July 28, 1648

⁴ Conference on the use of the goods made available to the Sisters, August 5, 1657

⁵ Conference on the spirit of the Society, February 9, 1653

specific to him is to dedicate himself, like Jesus Christ, to the poor" (ES XI-A, 387|SV XII, 79)⁶. The interior dimension nourishes and impels the exterior, while the exterior dimension concretizes and actualizes the interior. It is worth mentioning here what the Christian philosopher E. Mounier wrote when referring to the existence of a person enshrined in history: "Without the exterior life, the interior life would be incoherent, just as, without the interior life, it would be nothing but delirium"⁷. This is, then, the first notion of identity that we can draw from the intuitions of Vincent de Paul: our vocation has its own physiognomy, a face that defines and makes it visible, a specific way of situating ourselves in the Church and the world, according to the charism that the Spirit communicated to us through the founder.

2. **The Vincentian identity is structured in a dialectical process**, in a permanent and healthy tension between fidelity and creativity. It is, therefore, a *"trajectory traced between two stones: that of the inherited essence and that of the historically structured existence"*⁸. We are, at the same time, heirs and artisans of our identity. Speaking to the Daughters of Charity on one occasion, St. Vincent was very conscious of the dynamism that characterizes the spirit or identity of an apostolic community: *"You see what the beginning of your Congregation was. And so, since it was not then what it is now, it is to be believed that it is not yet what it will be when God brings it to the state in to which He wants it"* (ES IX-A, 234|SV IX, 245)⁹. The Vincentian identity is presented as a gift and a responsibility; not only a testament received from the past, but also a goal that we have to reach, a purpose that we need to assume, day after day, always in search of the unity that gives it meaning and consistency¹⁰. In the same way, just as a plant draws its sap from its roots and is strengthened by it, so too does its identity need to be continually nourished by the inspiration that gave it birth and keeps it dynamic, that is, open to timely modifications, and up to date, capable of responding effectively to the challenges of each historical moment. When heritage imposes itself as something hermetic or when the construction of the new neglects its roots, identity is impoverished and blurred¹¹. The new that we wish to offer to the poor and to the Church, as heirs and practitioners of Vincentian tradition, cannot do without the richness of the heritage bequeathed to us by the founder, which is rooted in the Gospel that framed his entire existence. In fact, to be truly original, we must return to our origins, to what we have that is most genuine. Pope Francis knew how to renew this call: *"Paying attention to one's own history is indispensable for keeping alive the identity and strengthening the unity of the family and the sense of belonging of its members. It is not a question of doing archaeology or cultivating useless nostalgia, but of walking the path of past*

⁶ Conference on the purpose of the WC, 6 December 1658.

⁷ O personalismo. São Paulo: Centauro, 2004, p. 66.

⁸ SUESS, Paulo. Introdução à Teologia da Missão. Convocar e enviar: servos e testemunhas do Reino. Petrópolis: Vozes, 2007, p. 186.

⁹ Conference on love of vocation and assistance to the poor, February 13, 1646

¹⁰ Sobre el carácter evolutivo de toda identidad, ver: BAUMAN, Zigmunt. Identidade. Entrevista a Benedetto Vecchi. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 2005, pp. 16-31. En la perspectiva cristiana: BÜHLER, Pierre. A identidade cristã: entre a objetividade e a subjetividade. Concilium, 216 (1988/2), pp. 25-27.

¹¹ Cf. SUESS. Introdução à Teologia da Missão, p. 185-188.

*generations to rediscover in them the inspiring spark, the ideals, the projects, the values that have driven them, starting from the founders and foundresses and the first communities"*¹².

Whoever wants to be aware of the Vincentian identity has to return to the sources to imbibe the original and creative richness of the charism and, thus, advance with more insight and vigor in the direction of the challenges and demands of the mission in the various contemporary contexts.

3. **Building an open, dialogical and interactive identity.** On many occasions, our founder was convinced of the importance of a broad and deep ownership of the specifics of our vocation. However, he was aware that this did not imply any superiority complex or narcissistic isolation. Instead, St. Vincent insisted that his Fathers and Brothers know how to recognize the merits of the different spiritual families existing in the Church, thus advocating what is understood today as complementarity and convergence between the charisms and ministries that enrich the shared mission of the people of God: *"God has raised up this Company, like all the others, for his love and good pleasure. All tend to love him, but each one loves him in a different way: the Carthusians by their solitude, the Capuchins by their poverty, others by the singing of his praises; and we, my brothers, if we have love, must show it by leading the people to love God and their neighbor, to love their neighbor for God and God for their neighbor"* (ES XI-B, 553|SV XII, 262)¹³. Vincent de Paul himself guided and accompanied closely the foundation and flourishing of several religious communities, helping them to discern and assimilate their respective identities¹⁴. He knew that, by God's design, each charismatic identity has a vision of Jesus Christ and a dimension of his saving mission: *"The congregations that exist in the church of God look at our Lord in different ways, according to the various attractions of his grace, according to the different lights and ideas he gives them, each in its own state; and so they honor him and imitate him in different ways"* (ES XI-B, 571|SV XII, 284)¹⁵. The conclusion is obvious: we are different, but not distant. No one charism alone encompasses all the needs of God's people. The different charisms that drive the life of the church are identities in permanent relationship and as such should interact with a view to the common mission of spreading the Kingdom in history, each one keeping intact what is particular to it. In this respect, there is no need to demarcate rigid boundaries of separation, yielding to superficial comparisons and

¹² Apostolic Letter for the Proclamation of the Year of Consecrated Life, n. 1

¹³ Conference on charity, May 30, 1659. Also to the Daughters of Charity, in the conference of February 9, 1653, the founder will say: "All Christians, my sisters, are obliged to practice these virtues (charity, simplicity and humility), but the Daughters of Charity have this obligation in a special way (...). The Carthusians are bound to the practice of all the virtues, but they are especially devoted to singing the praises of God. The Capuchins also have an obligation to practice all the virtues, but none of them are so dear to them as the virtue of poverty. In the same way, God wants the Daughters of Charity to dedicate themselves especially to the practice of three virtues, humility, charity and simplicity" (ES IX-A, 537|SV IX, 596).

¹⁴ The emblematic case of the Christian Union of St. Chaumont, founded in 1652 by Mrs. De Pollalion, a close collaborator of Father Vincent de Paul in the Confraternities of Charity, serves as an example. From its origins until today, this religious congregation recognizes St. Vincent as its founder at the side of the aforementioned lady (Cf. PEYROUS, Bernard; TEISSEYRE, Charles. A spiritual tradition: l'Union-Chrétienne de Saint-Chaumont. Poitiers: Union-Chétienne, 2000, especially pages 45-53).

¹⁵ Conference to the Missionaries on the good use of slander, June 6, 1659.

disdainful clichés, which proceed by generalization. This is what happens, for example, when one simply associates individualism and accommodation to the lifestyle of the diocesan clergy. We know, however, that there are not a few diocesan priests who are committed to the demands of their vocation, exemplary in the cultivation of the spiritual life, pastoral charity and priestly fraternity¹⁶. In dialogue and collaboration with other identities, the Vincentian identity is deepened and enriched, bringing its specific contribution to the mission of the church. As Pope Francis emphasized: "*The most beautiful experience is to discover with how many different charisms and with how many gifts of his Spirit the Father fills his church. This should not be seen as a reason for confusion, for uneasiness: they are all gifts that God gives to the Christian community so that it can grow harmoniously, in faith and in his love, as one body, the body of Christ*¹⁷."

In these presuppositions, we discover a threefold incentive: to immerse ourselves ever more deeply in the rich uniqueness of the spiritual and apostolic heritage that constitutes the Vincentian charism; to appropriate the dynamism that characterizes our identity, manifesting its charismatic and missionary vitality in our responses to the challenges of each moment and of each reality; and to establish bridges of dialogue and collaboration with other communities at the service of the common mission of sowing the Good News in word and deed. We will be, then, like that disciple of the Kingdom who brings out of his storeroom things new and old (Cf. Mt 13:52).

II - Axes of the Vincentian identity of the CM

Before discussing the foundations of the Vincentian identity in the CM, it is important to at least recall the principles of identity revitalization suggested by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), in its Decree *Perfectae Caritatis* (n. 2): the supreme norm of the Gospel, the inspiration and intentions of the founders, the tradition and magisterium of the Church, the legitimate hopes and needs of our contemporaries, and finally the primacy of spiritual renewal that must influence all other dimensions of life. It is always good to refresh what is already known so that it does not fall into routine. This return to the basics advocated by Vatican II is an indisputable theological element. In fact, the ultimate root of our identity is essentially theological and is never reduced to

¹⁶ At this point, the secular clergy can benefit greatly from the so-called Fraternities, Associations or Priestly Institutes, such as those that follow the respective spiritualities of Blessed Charles de Foucauld (Jesus Caritas), Blessed Anthony Chevrier (Prado) and Blessed James Alberione (Jesus Priest). Perhaps one day we can offer similar help to diocesan priests, transmitting to them the richness of Vincentian spirituality applied to the specifics of their way of life.

¹⁷ General Audience of October 1, 2014.

aspects of a merely philosophical, psychological, sociological or operational nature¹⁸. Moreover, the identity of the CM is synthesized in the pages of the Constitutions (1984) - which also need to be adapted in order to respond better to the challenges of a world that is changing radically and at an alarming rate - especially in the correct formulation of its purpose (CC 1).

To return to the sources and translate their essence in a meaningful and relevant way for our times is the most important effort to be undertaken in order to revitalize our identity. For this reason, we are not authorized to take for granted values and principles that - although widely read, studied and debated - in practice are not sufficiently assimilated and remain indispensable and even unavoidable. The renewal and revitalization of the charism comes through a double fidelity: to the essential values that make up the original project of the founder and to the historical developments of each epoch. And this double fidelity is carried out at the price of careful discernment and continuous personal, communal, and institutional conversion¹⁹. Only in this way will the CM become ever the same in constant innovation (*semper idem in novitate*), since, as the great mystic and pastor, Don Helder Camara said: "We must change a lot to remain the same", that is, to live and act from the very essence, to which we always need to return in order to recover our unique richness. We are once again faced with the challenge of combining greater fidelity and daring creativity, as a recent document of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life recalled: "What we want to preserve must be constantly updated. Fidelity, therefore, is combined with creativity: something must change and something must be maintained. The important thing is to discern what in perseverance must remain from what, on the contrary, can and must change²⁰.

It is up to us, therefore, to incarnate and radiate the evangelical and Vincentian spirit that defines our identity. And we have to do it from the way we live the constitutive aspects of our way of life (prayer, ministries, works, community, virtues, vows, ecclesiality, secularity, etc.), within the multiple circumstances in which we situate ourselves as depositaries and dispensers of the charism received from the Spirit through St. Vincent. Due to the limited space, we mention below only the three main axes or nuclei of the identity renewal of the CM according to the wisdom of the founder updated in the Constitutions.

1. The centrality of Jesus Christ. The first axis of the Vincentian identity is none other than the absolute centrality of Jesus Christ in our life as Missionaries²¹. Christ is the firm rock on which we must build the edifice of our vocation (Cf. Mt 7:24). St. Vincent expressed this in

¹⁸ Cf. CODINA, Víctor. Teologías da Vida Religiosa. In: CODINA; ZEVALLOS, Noé. Vida Religiosa: história e teologia. Petrópolis: Vozes, 1987, pp. 122-125. | Ver también: VITÓRIO, Jaldemir. A pedagogia na formação: reflexão para formadores na Vida Religiosa. São Paulo: Paulinas, 2008, pp. 20-24.

¹⁹ Cf. QUINTANO, Fernando. Palabras y escritos esenciales. Madrid: CEME|La Milagrosa, 2020, pp. 319-321.

²⁰ El don de la fidelidad. La alegría de la perseverancia. Orientaciones (2020), n. 32.

²¹ On the subject, there is abundant bibliography. Here, we have used mainly: RENOARD, Jean-Pierre Saint Vincent de Paul, maître de sagesse: initiation à l'esprit vincentien. Bruyères-le-Châtel: Nouvelle Cité, especially the second part, pp. 79-107. | UBILLÚS, José Antonio. Returning to Jesus to Evangelize. Annals of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, Madrid, volume 123, n. 3, May-June 2015, pp. 251-265.

many and varied ways, with an unparalleled insistence, thereby transmitting his own experience, the experience of someone who decided *"to consecrate his whole life, for love of Jesus Christ, to the service of the poor"*, according to the purpose he assumed even at the age of 30, when he was involved in a temptation against the faith²². To the Missionaries he would say, repeatedly, that "Christ is the rule of the Mission" (ES XI-B, 429|SV XII, 130)²³, *"the true model and the great invisible image with which we must conform all our actions"* (ES XI-A, 129|SV XI, 212)²⁴. Therefore, *"we must put on the spirit of Jesus Christ (...), to live and work as our Lord lived and to make his spirit manifest in the whole Congregation and in each of the missionaries, in all their works in general and in each one in particular"* (ES XI-A, 410|SV XII, 107-108)²⁵. From this relationship of communion and friendship with Jesus Christ, daily deepened in contemplation and mission, a new way of relating to God and to others is born, a new vision of faith. For all these reasons, Jesus Christ is the guiding principle of the existence of the Missionary and the enlightening criterion of his discernment and decisions: *"To use our spirit and our reason well, we must have as an inviolable rule that of judging in everything as our Lord has judged; I repeat, to judge always and in all things as he did, asking ourselves when the occasion arises: 'How did our Lord judge of this? How did he behave in such a case? What did he say? I must adjust my behavior to his maxims and to his example. Let us follow this rule, my brothers, let us walk this path with complete conviction"* (ES XI-A, 468|SV XII, 178)²⁶. Each and every effort of identity revitalization must start from Jesus Christ. And more: from the Christ whom Vincent de Paul met, contemplated and followed throughout his life, the Christ sent by the Father to evangelize the poor, who consumed his entire historical existence in the fulfillment of the saving will of the One who sent him to spread the seeds of the Kingdom in the soil of history. The 42nd General Assembly (2016) reminded us clearly: *"Jesus Christ is the center of our life and mission, the rule for our identity, the content of our preaching, the reason for our passion for the poor"* (2.1.). At this juncture, we need to ask ourselves how our relationship of friendship and communion with the Lord is going, how we nourish it personally and communally. The issue is, then, the cultivation of an interior life that identifies us as Missionaries and that encourages our search for holiness in our daily lives. In many places, the members of the Congregation have become known for their generosity of commitment and their availability for service. May we also be known for the fruitfulness of a spiritual life that radiates and spreads to those who live and work with us. Do we allow Christ to be, in fact, the source of our life as Missionaries? Do we guarantee the harmony between the Gospel that we meditate on, the Eucharist that we celebrate and the poor whom we serve, as privileged mediations of our daily encounter with the

²² La vie du vénérable serviteur de Dieu Vincent de Paul, instituteur et premier supérieur général de la Congrégation de la Mission. Paris: Florentin Lambert, 1664, tomo III, p. 118.

²³ Conference on the search for the Kingdom of God, February 21, 1659.

²⁴ Repetition of Prayer from August 1, 1655.

²⁵ Conference on the members of the Congregation of the Mission and their duties, December 13, 1658.

²⁶ Conference on simplicity and prudence, March 21, 1659

Lord? For us, is the following of Jesus Christ, the evangelizer of the poor, really the impulse of the mysticism and ethics that are expressed in the living out of the five virtues and the vows?

2. **Destined for the poor.** One of the strongest convictions of St. Vincent refers to the integral evangelization of the poor as the reason for the existence of the Congregation²⁷. In fact, fidelity to this vocation is intimately associated with its objective. This means that, in the context of the Vincentian charism, charity and mission have an unmistakable orientation: the least of our brothers and sisters (Cf. Mt 25:40), those who lack what is indispensable for a dignified and happy life, those who cannot repay us for what we do to them (Cf. Lk 14:12-13). It is a matter, then, of the real and concrete poor, those neglected and discarded by society, those who - in addition to existential, psychological, moral, spiritual poverty, etc. - are burdened with the deprivation of the most basic necessities of life, victimized by the selfishness and injustice that wound their dignity. Together with them, through compassionate presence, creative evangelization, and effective service, we continue the mission of the Son of God: "*Yes, our Lord asks us to evangelize the poor: that is what he did and what he wants to continue doing through us*" (SV XI-A, 386|SV XII, 79). As can be easily understood, Vincent de Paul's radical option for the poor has nothing to do with a sectarian ideology or a mere operational strategy. It is born of an exuberant experience of faith, of the mystery of his vocation, of his personal encounter with Jesus Christ, which constantly sends him to the least of this world. The Gospel is the supreme rule of Vincent's life and the pattern of his action in the Church and in the society of his time, the key and the path of his commitment to the poor in the following of Jesus Christ. In a memorable conference, the founder alludes to possible questions or objections that may arise around the theme of the evangelization of the poor as the beating heart of the identity of the CM in the Church. And he adds a very clear description of the uniqueness of the Congregation, constituted by God to prolong the mission of Jesus Christ. This is a grace that requires a commitment to communication and conformity, renewed daily: "*But there is no community in the Church of God that has the poor as its own lot and that gives itself completely to the poor (...); and this is what the missionaries do; what is special about them is to dedicate themselves, like Jesus Christ, to the poor. Therefore, our vocation is a continuation of theirs or, at least, can be related to it in their circumstances*" (ES XI-A, 387|SV XII, 79-80)²⁸. In the vision of faith that St. Vincent offers us, the missionary is called to rediscover himself every day as a friend, evangelizer and servant of the poor. The 42nd General Assembly wanted to emphasize this truth inscribed in the heart of the Vincentian identity: "*The poor constitute our own lot, our inheritance; it is to them that our evangelizing action is directed; they are also our first collaborators. In direct contact with them, the poor evangelize us (...). Our relationship with the poor, with the same sentiments of Jesus Christ, identifies us as missionaries (the opposite of officials)*" (n. 2.3.). For us, the

²⁷ On this subject, in all its richness and breadth, we do not know of a more solid reference than this: GROSSI. Um místico da Missão, Vicente de Paulo. 2ª ed. Belo Horizonte: PBCM, 2016, pp. 49-112. Ver también: FERNÁNDEZ, Celestino. El pobre en el corazón de San Vicente. VV.AA. La experiencia espiritual de San Vicente de Paúl. 35 Semana de Estudios Vicencianos. Salamanca: CEME, 2011, pp. 507-529.

²⁸ Conference on the purpose of the Congregation of the Mission, December 6, 1658.

mission is not a professional activity, it is a privileged expression of conformity to Jesus Christ, of our dedication to God. We need, therefore, to dedicate time and attention to discerning our missionary presence with those to whom we are intended by virtue of our specific vocation. It is time, then, to review the current meaning, charismatic relevance and prophetic relevance of our ministries, projects and works. Do the places where we are located, the services we provide and the way we do them make manifest the truth of who we are as evangelizers of the poor? Or are we comfortably content with maintaining profitable structures, limiting ourselves to a mere maintenance ministry? Do we cultivate inner freedom and spiritual clarity in order to move in other directions, discover new paths, and take creative and effective action in approaching the reality of the poor and responding to the calls of the realities where our mission is carried out? The present pontificate, so in accord with our charism, asks of us the courage to place ourselves on the frontiers, on the margins, on the outskirts, with an authentic evangelical and Vincentian sense. May the prophetic Encyclical *Fratelli tutti* speak to us and encourage us!

3. **To form clergy and laity in and for missionary charity.** Having affirmed the unparalleled priority of the evangelization of the poor, as the primary goal of the CM, the formation of the clergy and laity stands as an inalienable aspect of Vincentian identity²⁹. St. Vincent himself said it: "Well, the most important part of our vocation is to work for the salvation of the poor people of the countryside, and everything else is only incidental" (ES XI-A, 55|SV XI, 133)³⁰. For the good of the poor, so that the message of the Gospel would be established among them, Vincent de Paul committed himself to the formation of priests and to the animation of the laity, inviting them to rekindle the gift of God that had been entrusted to them (Cf. 2Tm 1:6). Although implicitly, the Document of the 42nd General Assembly did not fail to emphasize this constitutive feature of our charism. And it did so in the framework of the Lines of Action and Commitments: "To share the missionary and ecclesial sense of our evangelization and our service to the poor, with the formation of the clergy and laity, especially for missionary leadership" (n. 3.5.d)³¹. Today, as in the past, the Church needs lay people and priests who are convinced, consistent and committed, virtuous and capable of serving the Kingdom.

A) In his flourishing apostolic activity, Father Vincent sensed that, in order to "make the Gospel effective" (ES XI-A, 391|SV XII, 84), it was imperative to provide the Church with wise and humble pastors, who would be at the service of the people, wherever they lived, struggled and hoped, in the countryside and in the cities. For this reason, he established the formation of the clergy as an activity proper to his Congregation, a necessary component of the evangelization of the poor: "The third aim of our humble

²⁹ On the two topics, see: FARÌ, Salvatore. *La formazione iniziale al Presbiterato nell'esperienza vincenziana*. Roma: CLV, 2009 | RENOARD, Jean-Pierre. *Los laicos y el Señor Vicente*. In: VV.AA. *Avivar la Caridad*. Salamanca: CEME, 1998, pp. 71-94.

³⁰ Repetition of Prayer from October 25, 1643.

³¹ The following item also refers to the subject: "Prepare among our people, as well as among the laity and clergy, agents for Systemic Change who will make it alive and promote it" (n. 3.5.e).

institute is to instruct the clergy, not only in the sciences, so that they may know them, but also in the virtues so that they may practice them. What is the use of teaching them without each other? Nothing or almost nothing. They need competence and a good life; without the latter, the former is useless and dangerous. We have to bring them both equally; that is what God asks from us" (ES XI-A, 390|SV XII, 83)³². Now that the heyday of the CM's work in the formation of the clergy has passed, it is up to us to identify new ways of making this dimension of the Congregation's purpose more concrete. There is no lack of need, just as there is no lack of possibilities, especially where there is a shortage of formators, in local churches marked by pastoral and economic shortages. Let us think, for example, of the help we can offer through serious and careful spiritual accompaniment, the guidance of spiritual exercises, seminary and academic teaching, programs of initial and ongoing formation, pastoral cooperation, and above all our personal and communal witness. Perhaps without the same prominence as before (rectorates of large seminaries, for example), but without diminishing the spiritual depth, intellectual rigor, and apostolic zeal that the task demands. Let us still think of the widespread use of the permanent diaconate, which often gives rise to native vocations in more remote places (among the indigenous peoples of the Amazon, for example). In the harmonious exercise of the double ministry (Marriage and Order), many deacons become valuable missionaries in different outlying areas or frontiers. The field of the formation of the clergy continues to be vast and needs to be rediscovered, even more so given the crises that affect the present moment.

- B) The prominence of the laity in the life and mission of the Church, which was to be recognized and encouraged by Vatican II³³, found in Vincent de Paul an authentic and enthusiastic precursor. All his charitable-missionary action was accompanied and enriched by the qualified collaboration of lay people who truly identified with his apostolic ideal and were infected by his evangelical conviction. Father Vincent awakens women and men to face the miseries and needs of their time, communicates to them a vigorous experience of faith and engages their intelligence and sensitivity in the evangelization and service of the poor. From the beginning to the end of his pastoral journey, Vincent was closely accompanied by lay men and women who shared his passion for Christ and his compassion for those who suffered. The laity are, therefore, at the origin and development of charity and mission. If "the Church is like a great harvest that requires workers to work" (ES XI-B, 734|SV XI, 41)³⁴, few have known how to energize her so strongly in her fidelity to the Gospel as Vincent de Paul did, bringing together people resolutely oriented towards holiness in the following of Jesus Christ and in the concern for the disinherited of history. St. John Paul II was right when he said of our founder: *"The vocation of this brilliant initiator of charitable and social action still*

³² Conference on the purpose of the CM, 6 December 1658.

³³ See, for example: Lumen Gentium, n. 31 | Apostolicam actuositatem, n. 8

³⁴ Outline of a conference on the love of God. Not dated

*illuminates today the path of his sons and daughters, of the laity who live by his spirit, of the young people who seek the key to a life that is useful and radically spent in the gift of themselves*³⁵.” We are challenged to provide a consistent formation to the laity who collaborate with us in the service of missionary charity, with particular attention to the members of the Vincentian Family, but also to those in our parishes, schools, universities and works in general, opening ways to promote the role of the laity in the ministries and in ecclesial decision-making bodies, as well as in the areas of society, culture, and politics, so that we all work together, in a permanent complementarity, in the construction of a more fraternal and supportive world, a foretaste of the Kingdom which is both gift and responsibility.

III - Trends or risks

There is no doubt that the arduous and exciting task of revitalizing the identity of the CM requires at least three movements that are closely related to each other: a growing deepening or understanding of the essential values that make up the original vision of the founder, a faith-based look at the changes and perspectives that characterize the present moment in history, and the implementation of a new project of life and mission that involves and updates the constitutive aspects of our core identity. The Instruction on the vows is a clear and lucid summary of the challenge we have before us:

*The same original inspiration of St. Vincent and his first companions continues to call the CM today. Jesus, the evangelizer of the poor, continues to call us today to follow him on his journey among the abandoned and marginalized. The response of the CM, based on the radical commitment of each person to follow Jesus as a disciple, is a collective action. During the life of St. Vincent, the most urgent needs of the poor, the apostolic mission, the common life, the call to be a disciple of Jesus, as well as the example of St. Vincent himself, were able to create a dynamism that gave the nascent CM its specific identity. Faithful to that tradition, the Congregation strives to follow the breath of the Spirit in the events and situations of our time. An equal dynamism, made up of similar elements, urges us today to incarnate the Vincentian charism in a new historical context and to respond in new ways to the urgent needs of the poor*³⁶.

We all know that a work of this magnitude presupposes predispositions that we cannot do without: integrity of intention, spirit of prayer, profound discernment, serious study, common sense, ecclesial harmony, love for the Congregation, respectful dialogue, persistent work, persistence towards the ends, flexibility in the means, etc. In addition, it is necessary to combat certain insidious tendencies that put at risk the process of identity revitalization,

³⁵ Letter from Pope John Paul II to the Superior General of the CM. May 12, 1981.

³⁶ Instruction on stability, chastity, poverty and obedience in CM. Rome: General Curia, 1996, pp. 11-12.

undermining its foundations and narrowing its horizons. By way of illustration, we typify twelve:

1. *ideological reductionism* which consists in clinging to ideas, conveniences or partial interests in advance, without taking into account the principles that support identity and without allowing oneself to be challenged by circumstances (the signs of the times) and needs (of the poor, of the Church, of the Congregation...);
2. *nostalgia for the past*, for its achievements and glories, as if one could simply transport from there the answers to be given to the concrete challenges of today, with the risk of falling into decline;
3. *the desire for novelty*, without worrying about strengthening oneself with the sap that comes from the roots and taking for granted what has not yet been assimilated (even if it has been much discussed), with the danger of losing sight of the fundamentals and of changing just for the sake of changing (which does not necessarily imply an improvement);
4. *the temptation to lower the bar*, to level down, renouncing the evangelical-Vincentian ideal, lowering the demands of the charism, contenting oneself with the minimum required, accommodating oneself to what has already been achieved and dispensing with more demanding efforts and bolder initiatives;
5. *hollow optimism*, which hides reality, contemporizes inconsistencies, camouflages omissions, does not encourage conversion, ignores fidelity and does not recognize what has to be changed (assumption to redeem);
6. *destructive pessimism*, which steals hope, obscures joy, closes off possibilities and overlaps the creativity that goes hand in hand with fidelity;
7. *the absence of a fair scale of values*, which does not distinguish between the essential and the accidental, the central and the peripheral, the primary and the secondary, as if everything has the same importance and the same urgency;
8. *intellectualism*, which does not leave the plane of ideas, diluting itself in abstractions of little or no incidence, without landing on the concrete and without allowing itself to be challenged by situations;
9. *legalism*, which absolutizes the norms, does not open up to processes and does not dispose itself to revisions, showing itself to be prone to paralysis;
10. *subjectivism*, which restricts itself to primary feelings and reactions, becoming entrenched in attachments and not launching itself into new challenges, conditioning the demands of the vocation to individual demands or comforts;
11. *praxism*, which underestimates discernment and reflection, and can thus mask the spiritual void, cover up unremedied deficiencies and degenerate into compulsion or activism devoid of purpose and transcendence;
12. *pelagianism*, which does not take into account the fact that the revitalization of the identity of the CM is not reduced to rationalizations, plans, and strategies, but entails an

act of faith, which must be accompanied and energized by the prayerful surrender of our efforts to the One who is the author and perfecter of our missionary vocation.

Another document from the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life summarizes what such temptations represent for a community that wishes to catch up with its identity:

Every stabilized system tends to resist change and does everything possible to maintain its position, sometimes hiding incongruities, other times accepting a poor approach to the old and the new, or denying reality and friction in the name of a concord that is fictitious, or even concealing its own ends with superficial adjustments. Unfortunately, there is no lack of examples in which one finds a purely formal adherence, without the necessary conversion of heart³⁷.

Conclusion

The risky journey of the coronavirus pandemic made us, at least in part, stop the frenetic and convulsive rhythm of ordinary life and challenged us to move from a cursory glance to a deeper consideration of existence, its meaning, its value, its relationships. It urged us, therefore, to move from dispersion to depth. Here we discovered a challenge for us, members of the CM, in the continuous effort to revitalize our identity, in the midst of a fluid and luminous culture that is stagnating in superficiality, temporariness and agitation³⁸. We must make depth the key to this process. This requires us to consolidate our convictions, to qualify our experiences and to promote our witness in all the dimensions that constitute the Vincentian identity. This depth is manifested in a mature humanity, in a balanced affectivity, in a consistent spirituality, in a solid formation, in a generous missionary commitment, in a truly fraternal living together, in the continuous effort to adjust, freely and joyfully, to the demands of the life project that we embrace in order to follow Jesus Christ the Evangelizer of the poor, in the footsteps of St. Vincent de Paul. And we are sure that the resonances of this commitment illuminated by faith expand, as in concentric circles, from the life of each Missionary and of each Community to the structures of each Province and of the whole Congregation. We hope, then, that the 43rd General Assembly will give us a new impetus in this direction as we move toward the fifth centenary of the CM.

³⁷ A vino nuevo, odres nuevos. La Vida Consagrada desde el Concilio Vaticano II. Retos aún abiertos. Orientaciones (2017), n. 11.

³⁸ At the inauguration of the 2011-2012 academic year at the University of Deusto, the recently deceased Fr. Adolfo Nicolás (1936-2020), general superior of the Society of Jesus, expressed himself thus: "Today wisdom is not common currency in our markets. In fact, it has never been. For the first time we have more information than the capacity to digest and process it. What is sold is not wisdom but superficiality: immediate solutions, prefabricated explanations, throwaway cultures, cheap grace... In spite of this, human beings tend untiringly to the ideal of wisdom" (Cited in the Annual Review of the University of Deusto: Deusto, n. 143, 2002, p. 47).

Translated by R. Rex Hays, CM.