

## THE PARISH IN LIGHT OF THE CULTURE OF VOCATION.

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St. Vincent had a reluctance to accept parishes.<sup>1</sup> His major concern seemed to have been the way the parishes impeded missionary mobility. However, he did accept parishes. He saw their value either for helping to train diocesan priests or for maintaining relationships with benefactors. His ambivalence lasted until his final days. Today, more than 35% of our confreres are involved in parish ministry.<sup>2</sup>

The Church is seriously reflecting on Parish Ministry, as evidenced in the publication in July of 2020 of Instruction “The pastoral conversion of the Parish community in the service of the evangelizing mission of the Church” (PC) of the Congregation for the Clergy.<sup>3</sup> The document is rooted in the vision of Pope Francis, stated in *Evangelii Gaudium* 27:

I dream of a ‘missionary option’... capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation

The document PC puts flesh to this dream of Pope Francis by stating in number 11:

A renewed vitality is required that favors the rediscovery of the vocation of the baptized as a disciple of Jesus Christ and a missionary of the Gospel, in light of the Second Vatican Council and subsequent Magisterium.

This vocation of the laity significantly influences our work as pastors. It shifts us from being in charge to collaborating with the Holy Spirit in bringing about the Kingdom of God.<sup>4</sup> This seems

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<sup>1</sup> Maloney, Robert P. C.M. (1997) “On Vincentian Involvement in Parishes,” *Vincentiana*: Vol. 41: No. 2, Article 10. Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentiana/vol41/iss2/10> first four pages.

<sup>2</sup> *Vincentiana*, Vol. 64, 1 page 3.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.vatican.va/content/romancuria/en/congregazioni/congregazione-per-il-clero/documenti.html>

<sup>4</sup> In *Lumen Gentium* 30: “For their pastors ... understand that it is their noble duty to shepherd the faithful and to recognize their ministries and charisms, so that all according to their proper roles may cooperate in this common undertaking with one mind.” In *Presbyterorum Ordinis* 9: “While trying the spirits to see if they be of God, priests should uncover with a sense of faith, acknowledge with joy and foster with diligence the various humble and exalted charisms of the laity. In *Pastores Dabo Vobis* 40: “...the Church fulfills her mission when she guides every member of the faithful to discover and live his or her own vocation in freedom and to bring it to fulfillment in charity. ... Indeed, God with his call reaches the call of each individual, and the Spirit, who abides deep within each disciple (cf. 1 Jn. 3:24), gives himself to each Christian with different charisms and special signs. Each one, therefore, must be helped to embrace the gift entrusted to him as a completely unique person, and to hear the words, which the Spirit of God personally addresses to him. In addition, 74: “... the priest is a member of the one body of Christ (cf. Eph. 4:16). His consciousness of this communion leads to a need to awaken and deepen co-responsibility in the one common mission of salvation, with a prompt and heartfelt esteem for all the charisms and tasks which the Spirit gives believers for the building up of the Church.” In *Christifidelis Laici* 32: “... Bearing fruit is an essential demand of life in Christ and life in the Church. The person who does not bear fruit does not remain in communion: ‘Each branch of mine that bears no fruit, he (my Father) takes away’ (Jn 15: 2). Communion with Jesus, which gives rise to the communion of Christians among themselves, is an indispensable condition for bearing fruit: ‘Apart from me you can do nothing’ (Jn 15:5). And communion with others is the most magnificent fruit that the branches can give: in fact, it is the gift of Christ and His Spirit. ... It is always the one and the same Spirit who calls together and unifies the Church and sends her to preach the Gospel ‘to the ends of the earth’ (Acts 1:8). On her part, the Church knows that the communion received by her as a gift is destined for all people. Thus the Church feels she owes to each individual and to humanity as a whole the gift received from the Holy Spirit that pours the charity of Jesus Christ into the hearts of believers, as a mystical force for internal cohesion and external growth. In *Evangelium Gaudium* 3: “I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day.” In

to me to be what 60 confreres from all over the world who are promoting vocations discovered in a month long meeting in Paris in 2018 – The culture of vocation. The insight is about our calling to realign our relationships as described in C. 1 so that putting on the Spirit of Christ, evangelizer of the poor (being a disciple), is the source and center of all we do. A useful metaphor is dropping the nets and following Jesus when called. My relationship with Jesus organizes everything that I do around the Will of the Father in harmony with a widely diverse expression of vocation. This change implies discernment and conversion. We are vigorously to do this individually and collectively. We are to put on the Spirit of Christ in a way that increases the poor's access to Him. We invite clergy and laity to join us in becoming disciples, an action that is hugely important given the scope of the Mission.

In our constitutions, at number 11, we define our major task as “Make the Gospel really effective”. We have chosen that

our work of evangelization in word and action should strive for this, that all, through a process of conversion and celebration of the sacraments, should be faithful to ‘the kingdom, that is to say, the new world, the new order, the new manner of being, of living, of living in community, which the gospel inaugurates (EN, 23).

If we allow ourselves to push the meaning of “community” to “communion”, then we readily connect with the Church’s evolution of this concept.

Communion is associated with solidarity (integral formation) in Pope St. John Paul II’s encyclical, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, in both number 38

... a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.

and in number 40, where the

...supreme model of unity, which is a reflection of the intimate life of God, one God in three Persons, is what we Christians mean by the word "communion." This specifically Christian communion, jealously preserved, extended and enriched with the Lord's help, is the soul of the Church's vocation to be a "sacrament," in the sense already indicated.<sup>5</sup>

Communion is the focus of our work in word and action, clearly having concrete social ramifications. However, the source is the unity in God that produces these concrete results in this world. We are “sacrament” of unity from which peace, in its biblical sense, is established.

Now let us add the notion of “Kingdom”. “Nor will they say, ‘Look, here *it is!*’ or, ‘There *it is!*’ For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst.” (*Lk 17:21*) Kingdom is a metaphor speaking of authority and of care, which unite in the notion of communion under the influence of incarnation. God expresses authority in Love that respects our freedom. We are baptized into this Love

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PC 33 “With their gaze fixed upon them, the Parish community evangelises and is evangelised by the poor, discovering anew the call to preach the Word in all settings, whilst recalling the ‘supreme law’ of charity, by which we shall all be judged.”

<sup>5</sup> “Since the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race...” *Lumen Gentium* 1

and come alive in the Spirit “Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see **the kingdom of God.**’ ” (*Jn 3:3*).

Here we enter the realm of the notion of Vocation. St. Vincent reminded us more than once that our call or vocation was from all eternity.<sup>6</sup> The vocation reaches fulfillment in the beatific vision, a unity with God who is Love. The path is our weakness submitted to God’s loving through us. There is no love if there is no free will, so we can see that God so created us that it is possible for us to incarnate the freely bestowed Spirit but that we are also free to say no.<sup>7</sup> When we say yes collectively, then the Spirit uses that very act to express communion that manifests the providence of God. We are the body of Christ whom the Spirit brings to unity in the manifestation of charisms. For this reason, discernment is indispensable to any system of planning we employ. We listen to where the Spirit is calling the local Church as its members say “yes” to what the Spirit wants to do through them for the good of all.<sup>8</sup> I remind us at this point that as weak human beings we need the help of structure to maintain integrity in the dialogue. We depend upon the Magisterium who is to hold us faithful to Scripture and Tradition as we mature in the *sensus fidei*.<sup>9</sup>

### Parishes

Let me now suggest a practical application. How do we respond to the massive secularization most prominent in the northern hemisphere but by no means absent in other sectors? The strategy is to develop a self-generating culture of vocation in the parish, helping all to be disciples of Christ. Remember we have over 1,000 confreres involved in this ministry. In what follows I am using insights gained over the past twenty-five or more years by the Siena Institute, a Dominican sponsored ministry that promotes becoming disciples of Jesus. This ministry is co-directed by a lay woman named Sherry Weddell whose reflection on her conversion to Catholicism has provided the fertile ground to nurture this ministry.

### Constitutions 1, 11, 12 and 42 in the light of establishing a Culture of Vocation in the parish

What is generally the “normal” experience of mission in the Parish? Perhaps this chart can help us take a critical look at mission in the Parish in the light of Vocation (Called by God)<sup>10</sup>, where “maintenance” is what was expressed as “self-preservation” in the earlier quote by Pope Francis.

Sector	Maintenance Oriented Parish	Mission Oriented Parish
Activity	Involving people in events and activities in the Parish.	Helping all people encounter Jesus and experience conversion through their involvement at the parish and outside of the parish (and as Vincentians, we prioritize our encounter with the poor as the privileged moment of this conversion!) <sup>11</sup>
Leadership	Forming individuals in the roles the parish institution requires.	Forming individuals to discern their charisms and God given vocations.
Commitment	Influencing parishioners to give more time, talent and treasure to the parish.	Helping individuals to give their entire life to Jesus and live out that commitment daily.
Sustaining	Sustaining the current parish structures and the number of people.	Sustaining a culture of discipleship, nurturing and sustaining the work of conversion in individuals.

<sup>6</sup> some: CCD:1:245, 346; CCD:2:314, 620.

<sup>7</sup> Rhaner, Karl *Foundations of the Christian Faith* p 122.

<sup>8</sup> I Cor. 12, 3-7.

<sup>9</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 67, 91-95, 904.

<sup>10</sup> Sherry Weddell, ed., *Becoming a Parish of Intentional Disciples* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, 2015), pp. 77-79. Ms. Weddell has two other books distilling the wisdom of decades of work: *Forming Intentional Disciples* and *Fruitful Discipleship*. I highly recommend these books.

<sup>11</sup> Parentheses added by Fr. Miles. See also footnote 4, PC 33.

<b>Passing on the Faith</b>	Relying solely on catechesis as the means of transmitting the faith.	Transmitting the faith through pre-evangelization, initial proclamation, and then catechesis in a systematic way.
<b>Formation processes</b>	Providing formation for ministries exercised only for the parish.	Answering the outward call of the parish by providing formation for individuals to both take part in parish ministries and transform the secular world.
<b>Communication</b>	Communicating in “insider” <sup>12</sup> language.	Communicating in language both “insiders and outsiders” can understand.
<b>Missionary Spirit</b>	Presuming that the goal is to get people to come to the place where Parish is located.	Leaving the Parish location to go out into the neighborhoods of the parish.

The call to discipleship, “Follow Christ”, in Constitutions 1 (C. 1) has a particularity “evangelizing the poor” that continues to challenge us today. The tendency is to connect the first part of C. 1 directly with C. 12 and forget about the rest of C. 1 and C. 11 and C. 42. This destabilizes the process by disconnecting it from its source of life. Christ can become only an image, a value perhaps, whose spirit becomes equal in our thinking to the trend of his teaching. In this way, our presence with the poor can become limited to social development. The problem here is the limitation, not the social development. The Spirit of Christ is the Third Person of the Trinity. We are in the field of incarnation, not skills building as commonly understood.

Incarnation is what we see as we continue with C. 1. “... the members individually and collectively: 1, make every effort to put on the spirit of Christ himself.” As I understand the notion here, it is to do things as Christ would do them. Again, we could make Christ a model and use will power to achieve virtue, but this path leads nowhere. The field of meaning is incarnation. The Spirit of Christ is a person of the Blessed Trinity. Putting on the Spirit is a process of conversion that involves confronting our personal vision of the world with Revelation, mediated by the Catholic Church, and in humility asking God for help where the two do not coincide. We want to get out of the way so that the Spirit can act through us, as the desert fathers have taught.<sup>13</sup>

This is exactly where the insight captured at C. 42 shines a clear light. “Apostolic involvement with the world, community life, and the experience of God in prayer complement one another and make an organic unity in the life of a missionary.”<sup>14</sup> The mission is not apostolic involvement alone. The mission is an organic unity of apostolic involvement, community life and the experience of God in prayer.<sup>15</sup> The metaphor is not of building blocks, which suggest prefabricated and individual components. The metaphor is organic unity, which suggests life as an integration of elements and processes whose existence depends upon the integration. Our mission is to live our own process of evangelization as defined in C. 11. It is a lifelong process of conversion or “on-going formation”. We are to be faithful to giving the Spirit evermore freedom to respond through us in order to create among us the communion Who is God with us.

As agents, then, in the parish we would have two major lines of action.

- Helping people to listen to their experience in order to hear the promptings of the Spirit calling them to the next step on the path of becoming disciples of the Christ and ultimately saying “yes” by dropping the nets and following Jesus.

<sup>12</sup> Insider language refers to using terms that people who are not part of the group (outsiders) would not easily understand.

<sup>13</sup> Tugwell, Simon O.P. *Ways of Imperfection: An Exploration of Christian Spirituality*. Springfield: Templegate. 1985. Chapter on Desert Fathers

<sup>14</sup> English translation of Latin “in vita missionarii invicem complentur et in unum coalescunt”

<sup>15</sup> My thanks to Fr. James Swift CM, former visitor of the Midwest Province USA, for capturing and promoting this insight.

- Helping people to listen to their experience to see how the Spirit is truly acting through them for the good of the Body of Christ, and so discern their charisms and engage the mission from that wellspring.

In my opinion, the lines of action would move the focus away from the parish or ourselves, per se. We are disciples. We are sharing with the people our own lived experience of being disciples who bear fruit. We do this in a way that enables this particular parish community to generate the conditions that call others to the same experience and response. The focus is the Kingdom, allowing the will of God to come alive in our flesh as disciples of Christ. The parish organization is a tool that we must be skilled in using. However, it is important to understand we are not developing our kingdom in the parish. We are helping the parish become missionary and then we will leave.

The second effect of the lines of action is giving us a way to distinguish ourselves from Diocesan priests by retaining our itinerate identity while serving the Church through the structure of the Parish. We will learn with time to recognize and elaborate the clear criteria that determine the end of our mission in a particular parish. My current reading suggests an average of eight years.

The third effect of the lines of action, and perhaps not as organically derived as the first two effects mentioned, is to encourage us to share the wealth of what will be happening and the how of its happening with our brother diocesan priests in the spirit of St. Vincent and the Tuesday Conferences. Without diocesan priests who are willing to lead these parishes when we leave, our ministry, as St. Vincent clearly noted<sup>16</sup>, will not be as effective.

The fourth effect of the lines of action is to connect us with the Dominican sponsored Siena Institute in the USA, which has over 25 years of experience in promoting the two lines of action described above. I think we can develop a working relationship with this center that would invigorate our ministry by helping us learn to walk this path.

## **POSSIBILITIES**

One possibility, mentioned above, is to contract with the bishop for pastoring a parish with the particular goal of creating a culture of vocation favoring intentional discipleship and leave when that is established. Another possibility would be collaborating by promoting in our missions an intervention of the Siena Institute or doing follow-up after an intervention. It also seems this culture of vocation approach to a parish would aid us in the formation of diocesan priests. Furthermore, I can see in this culture of vocation approach a method that creates a space for young people to actual hear a calling to consecrated life since the interference of feeling overly self-conscious for being ‘counter-cultural’ in today’s world is muted by the fact that the whole parish is involved in discerning their call in Christ.

I suggest that using the Culture of Vocation to guide our involvement in parish ministry gives us one firm path to follow in revitalizing our Charism at the dawn of the fifth Century.

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<sup>16</sup> CR XI, 12.