

2. Vincentian spirituality, a missionary spirituality

1. SEE – A contemplative look



At the beginning of this formative itinerary, taking as our horizon the 400th anniversary of the foundation of the Congregation of the Mission, we are invited to open ourselves to the surprises of the Lord's Spirit, allowing ourselves to be enlightened and challenged by the Word of God, by the Vincentian charism, and by the magisterium of Pope Francis. We do so moved by a deep spirit of faith, with a view to an authentic spiritual and missionary revitalization and through a sincere effort of personal and community conversion. In this way, we want to respond to what was recommended to us by the last General Assembly. To speak of Vincentian spirituality as a missionary spirituality means to return to our deepest roots, to the pulsating heart of our identity, to the core of the intuitions aroused by the Spirit in the heart of our Founder. We are an essentially missionary Congregation with a clear orientation toward the existential and geographical peripheries. It is

precisely there that the synodal and prophetic character of our vocation as followers of Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor, is rooted.

2. JUDGE – A lucid discernment

a. In the light of the Gospel (Read: Luke 5:1-11)

The boats were stopped on the shore of the lake and the fishermen, disillusioned by the failure of not having caught anything, were washing the nets torn from so many efforts. The night had been long and painful. It is then that Jesus of Nazareth emerges from the itinerancy of his mission along the roads of Galilee, sent by the Father to make his life good news of hope and salvation for the poor (cf. Luke 4:18), anxious to address a word of encouragement to the multitude that crowded around him, thirsty for God and desirous of encouraging answers to their dramas and scarcities. The discouragement of the fishermen does not intimidate him. Jesus senses the reservoir of goodness that dwells in their hearts and manages to draw generosity from disappointment, strength from weakness, solicitude from inertia. He proclaims the word of God from Simon's boat. He sets the example to those who will become his disciples, teaching them that meaningful living includes the ability to open oneself to others as brothers and sisters, to give oneself, to do good to people and to do it in the best possible way.

The desolate fishermen join the crowd to listen to that man of God who is brimming with compassion. Eyes are sparkling, hearts are strengthened, the horizon is broadened, something new is beginning to appear. In the word of Jesus of Nazareth, they hear the word of God. In the humanity of Jesus, there is something very different and captivating, a newness that radiates. The Master can then say to them: *"Put out into deep water and lower*

your nets for a catch” (v. 4). As if to say: Leave the surface, leave the comfortable shores where you are, allow the fear of failure to give way to the risk of new attempts, launch out into the adventure of faith. Simon’s response was emphatic: We worked all night, we did all we could, we spent all our strength, we used all our creativity... and we caught nothing. But, at your word, because it is you, because you command us, we are going to cast our nets. From here, the glimmers of a mature faith begin to appear, a faith that is required by the Kingdom, a faith that strips itself of self-sufficiency and manifests itself in trust and total dedication to the One who calls (cf., Matthew 21:25).

The result was surprising. It produced the prodigy of an abundant and generous catch that exceeded all expectations, so much so that the nets were breaking. The fishermen had to ask for help from their companions in the other boat. The abundance of fish was for everyone. Because of his act of faith, Simon (whose name means *he who listens*) is called Peter for the first time, a name that will be imposed on him later, as the first among the Twelve, to designate his mission as leader of the community (cf., Luke 6:12-16; Matthew 16:18). As in a theophany (cf., Exodus 19:16; 33:20), the catch of fish provoked astonishment and admiration, confirming the faith in the hearts of the disciples and dispelling the discouragement that had previously threatened their hopes and vitality (cf. Matthew 8:10; John 2:11). Simon becomes aware of his littleness before the holiness of Jesus, now called *Lord* for the first time (v. 8). Jesus, in turn, is not surprised by Simon’s confession of weakness. He neither drives him away from himself, nor distances himself from him. It is good for the disciple-missionary to be aware of his weakness and to assume his condition as a sinner. This will help him to mature as a person and will make him more understanding and compassionate toward others. Jesus’ reaction confirms to Simon Peter: *Do not be afraid. I am with you and you will be with me. You are a sinner loved and made capable of love.* From this lucid and passionate experience of faith comes the decision to follow the Master, who, in turn, confers on Peter and his companions the mission of being “*fishers of men,*” associating them with himself to make them heralds of the Kingdom, continuers of his saving work (cf., Matthew 10:1f; Luke 10:1f). They, aware that they had found their *heart’s treasure* (cf., Luke 12:33), “*brought their boats to the shore, ... left everything, and followed him*” (v. 11).

b. In the footsteps of Saint Vincent

Saint Vincent de Paul, a man shaped by the Gospel, made use of this episode of Luke at least twice to exhort and encourage his Missionaries to *row out to sea* in the ocean of charity and mission, of integral evangelization of the poor, attentive to the word of the Master.

1

The first mention is found in a very beautiful letter to the courageous Father Charles Nacquart, dated 22 March 1648 (cf., CCD III, 278-284), the year in which he would be assigned to Madagascar, at the age of just over 30, accompanied by another Missionary. There, in that distant and unknown country, his ardent charity and vigorous apostolic zeal would bear abundant fruit and his laborious existence would be consummated in less than two years after his arrival (29 May 1650).

After communicating to the young priest his destiny to the long-dreamed-of mission, Saint Vincent recalls the beauty and dignity of the missionary vocation, inviting him to receive with humble and daring faith the grace given to him: “*a vocation as lofty and adorable as that of the greatest Apostles and Saints of the Church of God, and the fulfillment in you, in time, of eternal plans! Humility alone, Monsieur, is capable of bearing this grace; and perfect abandonment of all that you are and can be, in exuberant trust in your Sovereign*”

Creator, must follow ... You also need faith as great as Abraham's and the charity of Saint Paul. Zeal, patience, deference, poverty, solicitude, discretion, moral integrity, and an ardent desire to be entirely consumed for God..." (CCD III, 279).

The Founder then discusses the reality of the country, the challenges of the mission in those lands, the dangers of the sea voyage (which could last even more than six months), and the risk of external influences on the conduct of the Missionaries (particularly on the part of those who had political and economic interests on the island and who were going to embark on the same ship). After emphasizing the importance of the witness of love of God through prayer, of personal integrity through the practice of the virtues, and of charity through solicitude for those who by chance became ill during the grueling voyage, Saint Vincent recommends to the two Missionaries uprightness, discernment, and prudence in all their relationships and procedures: *"Remain, however, faithful to God, so as not to fail in what concerns Him. Never betray His principles for any reason whatsoever, and take great care not to spoil God's affairs by too much haste in them. Take His own good time and know how to wait for it" (CCD III, 280).*

As far as the apostolate is concerned, Saint Vincent advises organization and planning, availability and mobility, discipline and patience, meekness and firmness, etc. He suggests taking as a starting point respectful closeness to those who will be evangelized and in whom the Missionaries should glimpse the conditions given by God for the reception of salvation (*semina Verbi*), conditions that they should foster with sensitivity and creativity: *"Your chief concern, after striving to live among those with whom you will have to get along amicably and in an exemplary way, will be to help these poor people, ... to understand the truths of our faith, not by subtle theological reasoning, but by arguments taken from nature. You have to begin in that way, trying to let them see that you are only developing in them the signs of Himself that God has left on them..." (CCD III, 280).*

Since the mission is the work of the Trinity, the Missionaries should be men of intense interior life, seeking to sense, in daily meditation and prayer, what the Spirit inspires in them, in such a way that the transmission of the faith will be meaningful, relevant, and effective: *"To do this, ... you will often have to turn to the Father of Lights, ... abandoning yourself to the Spirit of God, who speaks in these circumstances. If His Divine Goodness is pleased to give you the grace to cultivate the seed of the Christians who are already there, living with these good people in Christian charity, I have no doubt whatsoever, ... that Our Lord will make use of you there to prepare an abundant harvest for the Company" (CCD III, 281).*

In this context—in which grace and freedom interact, requiring trust and availability from those sent—Vincent makes the command of Jesus resound to those who also will become *"fishers of men,"* clothed with the spirit of Christ to continue the Savior's mission: *"Go then, Monsieur, and since your mission is from God, through those who represent Him for you on earth, cast your nets boldly" (CCD III, 281).* In following the Son of God, the Missionary of the poor becomes aware that he has received everything from the hands of the Father and, therefore, does not shy away from the commitment to spend his life for his brothers and sisters, communicating to them what is best: the joy of the Gospel, the same joy that fills his heart and illuminates his life.

2

The second allusion to the Lucan passage is found at the end of a letter of Saint Vincent to another Missionary, Father Antoine Fleury, assigned to Saintes. The letter is dated 6 November 1658 (cf., CCD VII, 355-358). It shows Vincent de Paul's concern for the accompaniment and guidance of his confreres, rejoicing with them, comforting them in the

midst of adversity, warning them of dangers, and stimulating them in their missionary zeal: *"I am worried because I have had no letters from you since you have been in Saintes. I am sending you mine to find out the state of your health, how the missions are succeeding there, whether the people are profiting by your spiritual exercises, and if they are assiduous in coming to your instructions"* (CCD VII, 355-356).

The Founder then reveals his knowledge of the history and current state of that locality, warning Father Fleury about the heresies among the *"poor Catholics."* With his usual sense of faith, keeping in mind the demands and challenges of the mission, he recommends: *"You must be patient and hope that the light of faith will gradually disperse all those shadows, and Jesus Christ will be the Master over the faith and morals of those poor people, whom the evil spirit has always tried to corrupt"* (CCD VII, 356). To the necessary patience, he recommends joining promptness and zeal to second the action of God and cooperate in his loving designs of salvation, following in the footsteps of Christ: *"You must also hope, Monsieur, that His great mercy will make use of you for that purpose; for, in the ordinary course of events, God tries to save men through men, and Our Lord became man Himself to save all of them"* (CCD VII, 356).

As in the preceding letter, here too Vincent evokes the unmerited grace of the vocation, in the face of which nothing remains for the Missionary but the total gift of self to continue the Savior's work with the ardor of charity: *"Oh! what a happiness for you to work at doing what He did! He came to bring the good news to the poor, and that is your lot and your occupation, too. If our perfection lies in charity, as is certain, there is none greater than to give oneself to save souls and to sacrifice oneself for them as Jesus Christ did. This is what you are called to do, Monsieur, and you are ready to respond to it, thank God"* (CCD VII, 356).

Continuing, Saint Vincent mentions the temptations that could remove the Missionary from his apostolic dynamism: thinking that he would do more good elsewhere, leaving aside the occasions that present themselves and omitting himself from his usual tasks; frivolities and vanities, which would prevent him from participating in the cross of Christ and finding fulfillment in him alone; excessive attachment to the family, which would not facilitate a mature response to the vocation received from the Lord; boredom at always having to do the same things; and discouragement at not producing the desired fruits in his apostolic labors. As a remedy for this discouragement caused by routine, Vincent advises convinced and renewed perseverance, for *"only perseverance wins the crown and ... all is lost without it"* (CCD VII, 357-358), the same perseverance that allows the Missionary to do well and with love all that he is called to do for God and for his brothers and sisters.

At the end of the letter, we find the reference to the biblical icon we are contemplating. The holy Founder uses it to comfort Father Fleury, inviting him to keep his confidence, serenity, fortitude, and enthusiasm intact, as a balm for missionary charity, especially in the midst of fatigue, hostilities, and failures. Extraordinary testimony of a living and industrious faith: *"... it is to be convinced that God asks of you only that you cast your nets into the sea, and not that you catch the fish, because it is up to Him to make them go into the nets. Have no doubt that He will do so if, having fished all night long despite the difficulties of the undertaking and the hardness of people's hearts—almost all asleep to the things of God—you wait patiently for day to come, for the Sun of Justice to awaken them, and for His light to illuminate and warm them. To this work and patience, you must join humility, prayer, and good example; then you will see the glory of the Savior"* (CCD VII, 358).

The mission enlightened by faith and energized by the charity of Christ is the secret of the life of Vincent de Paul and his Missionaries, those of yesterday and today, all called to be consistent and enthusiastic *"servants of the Gospel"* (CCD V, 593).

3. ACT - A renewed commitment

Our missionary spirituality corresponds to the happy intuition of Pope Francis when he refers to the *Church going forth* that we are called to build from fidelity to our charism. When undertaken with conviction and passion, mission becomes a source of fulfillment, vigor, and joy for us: *“Life grows by being given away, and it weakens in isolation and comfort. Indeed, those who enjoy life most are those who leave security on the shore and become excited by the mission of communicating life to others’. When the Church summons Christians to take up the task of evangelization, she is simply pointing to the source of authentic personal fulfilment. For ‘here we discover a profound law of reality: that life is attained and matures in the measure that it is offered up in order to give life to others. This is certainly what mission means’. Consequently, an evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral! Let us recover and deepen our enthusiasm, that ‘delightful and comforting joy of evangelizing, even when it is in tears that we must sow... And may the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the good news not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervour, who have first received the joy of Christ”* (Evangelii Gaudium, n. 10).

A) *Where we are:* most of Jesus’ mission takes place in the periphery (Galilee), outside the political and religious center (Jerusalem). Around him and in his company are the poor, the sick and sinners, whose longings he seeks to know in order to help them live with meaning, hope, and vigor. Saint Vincent was convinced that identification with Christ, the assimilation of his feelings, attitudes, and opinions, should precede and accompany the evangelization of the poor, so that the proclamation and witness would be coherent and effective. He wanted his Missionaries to be at the side of the truly poor, of those who lack what is indispensable to cover their vital necessities. For this reason, from the beginning, many members of the Congregation were sent to places marked by spiritual and material abandonment, invited to go out of themselves to reach the *“existential peripheries of life.”* This affective and effective closeness, this respectful and supportive presence should generate familiarity, mutual trust, and knowledge of the reality in which the poor live, suffer, and struggle. By the strength of the charism we have received, our orientation towards the poor is an ongoing and inescapable value.

→ Where does our mission take shape? Beside whom do we stand? Do we seek to think, feel, and act in communion with the poor?

B) *How are we:* the boats of the Galilean fishermen were docked and they, discouraged by the ineffectiveness of their efforts, already had given up fishing. Everything seemed to have been in vain. Jesus goes to meet those discouraged men and provokes them with his example and word. In Saint Vincent’s letters, we find several attempts at revitalization, particularly when charity and mission challenged and demanded more persistence, creativity, and enthusiasm on the part of his Missionaries and other collaborators. When our determination does not produce the expected fruits, when our efforts are not recognized, when we do not achieve satisfactory results, and do not win over honest backing, the way out is not to fold our arms, giving up. On the contrary, we need to mature in trust, patience, and perseverance.

→ Are our boats also at a standstill? How many nights, failures, and disappointments fatigue and discourage us? Are we convinced that the Lord is counting on us, that our mission is

God's work, an extension of the mission of Jesus Christ? Do we reserve moments of prayerful silence to listen to the Lord, to learn from his dedicated life, to let his Word enchant and provoke us, illuminating our path and driving our initiatives?

C) *What we must do:* Jesus' call reveals that, if the community wants to catch good fish, it will have to leave the shores and venture into deeper waters. The task may be more demanding and riskier, but the outcome tends to be more promising. There is no donation without risk, as Saint Vincent guarantees. Many times, we are worn out and disillusioned because we do everything the same way, repeating old patterns, staying on the shore, afraid to take risks, to step out of our comfort and security zones. The mission, enlightened by faith and energized by charity, is always new, because love is creative and always discovers new possibilities.

→ What areas do we have to leave? Where do we need to move forward in order to deepen our experience of God, to strengthen the bonds of fraternity among us, and to succeed in our evangelizing action with the poor? Are we capable of relativizing our schemes and pretensions in order to allow ourselves to be surprised and led by God?

D) *Sharing the mission:* after the abundant catch of fish, the disciples had to ask for the help of fishermen from another boat. Saint Vincent wanted his Missionaries to walk together with each other and with other collaborators [lay people, Daughters of Charity, priests, etc.]. From its origins, the Vincentian mission is a shared mission. Today more than ever, the laity occupy a primordial and indispensable place in the living out of our missionary charism. Together, in fraternal collaboration, we can make charity more inventive and the mission more effective.

→ Do we truly strive to impart our mission, praying and discerning together, working as a team, sharing fatigue, success, and failure?

E) *Mission is born of a profound experience of faith,* of an encounter with the Lord who calls us to live and witness to the joy of the Gospel. Nothing is more frequent in Saint Vincent's writings than this extraordinary vision of faith about the mystery of our vocation. Before working with the Word, the Missionary needs to let himself be worked by the Word. He is the first hearer of the message he transmits. Only in this way, his perseverance will not be dependent on his personal satisfaction or well-being. We remain in the Mission not because everything is peaceful and comfortable, but because the Lord has sent us and because our brothers and sisters need and await the Word that we announce and that moves us to promote a more human and fraternal world. The joy of the Missionary comes from his willingness to love and serve, to carry out the will of God, and to do good to his brothers and sisters.

→ Does the experience of faith help us to review the steps we have taken and to straighten our paths? Does it make us more confident, serene, generous, and resilient? Does it illuminate the horizon of our journey, indicating the primary goal of shared love and the ultimate goal of the definitive Kingdom?

Let us pray...

God of life and love,
we praise and thank you,

because you call us to follow your Son Jesus Christ,
in the footsteps of Saint Vincent de Paul.

You know our interior
and you see the good of which we are capable,
make us discover the meaning of our vocation
in the ardor of charity and mission,
as friends in solidarity with the poor,
artisans of justice and peace.

You, Lord,
you are the joy of our youth,
make us fruitful in prayer,
creative in service, and bold in purpose,
missionaries of your charity,
happy Vincentians,
free and committed,
on the path of your Kingdom.
Amen.