



Rolando Gutiérrez Zúñiga, CM

# WHERE *God* WANTS US

A journey toward  
*A Vincentian Vocational Culture*





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## PROLOGUE

*Where God Wants Us* is not only the title of this work that we have in our hands, but I dare to say that it is, above all else, the project of a lifetime that Father Rolando Gutiérrez, CM has engaged in. A few days ago, I said precisely that to him. Therefore, this work is more than a handful of pages with a common theme. This is the life's project of a young missionary that was begun some years ago, has moved into the present and is projected into the future as a dream or a declaration of intention. In this case, the book and the person go hand in hand, share one and the same destiny.

What is the thesis that this book sustains? Nothing less than the following: our Vincentian charism encompasses sufficient potential in its very core to generate a valid vocational response that is able to confront the challenges and needs of our contemporary world. Therefore, and even though this might sound like a cliché, the Vincentian vocation is a wholly relevant vocation because it fits like a hand in a glove, the hand of our charism-vocation with the glove of the present challenges.

From there the author leads us to two conclusions. The first we can summarize in the following manner: creating a vocational culture implies renewing the spiritual life of the missionaries and the ministerial life of the Province ... and therefore, renewing the whole Congregation. In other words, a vocational culture and vocation ministry cannot be reduced to mere instruments at the service of new vocations. A

vocational culture is a call to be leaven for those who are members and a crucible to align ministries in a more Vincentian perspective. In relation to all of this, Father Rolando speaks about the “pandemic of mediocrity” ... taking advantage of the now common language that has arisen at this time of the coronavirus, COVID-19 crisis. It is not evil that will destroy our vocation nor is it some form of infidelity (which is unusual among us), rather mediocrity places obstacles in the path of the bold dreams of Saint Vincent and drowns them in a realism that leads to inactivity and routine. Getting locked in secure comfort zones kills the vocation and people become trapped in boredom and dissatisfaction, trapped in a kind of Ferris wheel with no other horizon than a small circle of people and activities that ultimately becomes fruitless. Some of this was explained by Vincent de Paul in his December 6, 1658 conference. Now, having said all of this, the good news is that a vocational culture can shake up life when and if allowed to do so.

The second conclusion could not be more logical: vocational ministry is a service to all Christians, especially young men and women. Here the vocational culture is presented in the form of a pedagogy that makes possible the entrance of new vocations, not from the blind obsession of recruitment and numbers but from a process of discernment and the need to be inspired and formed from the perspective of the charism of Saint Vincent. I believe that this book is called to fulfill an important chlorophyll function, namely, that of bringing us a gust of fresh air when speaking about vocation and vocations ... it does this with depth, calmness, and serenity.

Perhaps the second part of the book (chapters III, IV and V) is the most original and, without a doubt, the most Vincentian.



The sequence of the chapters draws our attention: *vocational culture, Vincentian vocational culture, coordinates for a Vincentian vocational culture*. When speaking about a vocational culture and a Vincentian vocational culture, the author lines up a series of concepts that, in the end, present a design for an appropriate vocational ministry. They are strong brushstrokes that artists capture on a canvas to give perspective to their paintings. At no time is there a lack of depth in his approach ... and it should be stated that only when things are seen in depth can there be clarity in action. Here are some of the concepts that provide a context and a framework for vocational ministry. The *New Evangelization*: here the author refers to it as a perspective from which to understand the vocational culture. The pairing (New Evangelization and vocational culture) is explained by the author with the following words: *a vocational culture is at the heart of the New Evangelization, and the stronger its heartbeat, the more powerful is the proclamation of salvation to those who are poor and the more the number of workers who respond to this call*. The former method of recruiting young people to sustain our institutions is far from this ideal.

How does the author relate the concept of life-long formation with a vocational culture? According to Father Amedeo Cencini, the vocational crisis *is not with those who are called but with those who are calling*. Here, then, is the true meaning of life-long formation: making callers fit, passionate and skilled in calling so that the chain is not broken. Therefore, it will be necessary to begin with a formation of the heart (*you must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had [Philippians 2:5]*). From that will flow the formation of the head and of the hands ... a new lifestyle and new perspective from which to view vocations. Life-long formation ought to





be inspired by a vocational culture and, in turn, this culture should constantly refer individuals back to life-long formation. Father Rolando affirms, *they are destined to walk together or to die separately*.

Other concepts: *the gospel of vocation* ... It seems to me that this expression is a creation of the author and is utilized to inform us that vocation is good news for everyone but also is news that does not leave people indifferent but leads them into action as cocreators in God's plan. *All ministry is vocational ministry*: this concept appears in the document, *New Vocations for a New Europe*. To make all ministry vocational is to give both depth and seriousness to pastoral activity. In this way vocational ministry does not become a pastime, a good pastime if you will, but rather vocational ministry leads people to discern what should be their response in light of the Lord's existential call. If pastoral ministry does not achieve that purpose, then it is neither transformative nor serious. A separate chapter deals with methodology, how to arrive at the desired goal. Normally through a process that requires time and patience ... and the fruits will follow. Pope Francis affirms, *time is greater than space* ... and this theme is developed at the end of the book.

Dear reader, you have in your hands a work that is brief in length, but one that is insightful and very relevant, one whose content moves from data that is gleaned from our everyday reality (1<sup>st</sup> part) to a methodology for putting it into practice (3<sup>rd</sup> part and the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> part) and includes theoretical considerations that join together these two sections (2<sup>nd</sup> part, fundamentals). The book is elegant and descriptive, where well-developed imagery and expression are not lacking. We could easily say that this book passes the grade and leaves its mark on the reader. It leaves an "aftertaste" that is not easily





diluted, but returns again and again, like a catchy song. These pages can be read in dim light because so much light emerges from these pages.

The work shines with its own light and is well-documented with doctrinal sources such as Pope Francis; the 2018 Synod on Youth; the Apostolic Exhortation, *Christus Vivit*; the document, *New Vocations for a new Europe*; Father Amedeo Cencini. This tells us two things: first, that this is a current approach to the creation of a vocational culture and second, that the doctrinal content is not foreign to the thinking of the Church and the Congregation with regards to a vocational culture.

I will conclude because it is time for the reader to experience all of this for him/herself. Here, as is stated in the book of Revelation, I simply want to sweeten your palate, even if these pages make your stomach turn sour (Revelation 10:9-10). That will be a clear sign that you have digested this nutritious dish. To the author, friend and fellow member of the Congregation, I can only say, on behalf of all the readers, congratulations and thanks.

Father Francisco Javier Álvarez Munguía  
*Vicar general*





## INTRODUCTION

The first decades of the twenty-first century have been quite agreeable. I would say it has been like people who talk about an old friendship that has brought them great joy: being able to work on various Vincentian collaborative projects through a series of networks, systemic change, the Commissions of Peace and Justice, providing better resources for service on behalf of the poor in the areas of health and education, digital training, virtual meetings, the homeless project. We must also include the fact that we were able to gather thousands of Vincentians in Rome to celebrate the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our charism. These are facts that, just to name a few, reflect what we can do with a certain degree of normality and that perhaps would have been unthinkable during a previous era.

At the same time, the challenges of the last decades are no less visible and have been made very clear within the Vincentian Family: the multiplication of the faces of poverty, the phenomenon of immigration, religious fundamentalism, terrorism, secularism, scandals in the Church, problems of abandonment and stability in Vincentian Congregations in addition to a decrease in personnel in the West. These are some of the difficulties that can be found on the list that has been solemnly crowned by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since, with its lights and shadows, we have the stage on which we open the door to the fifth century of our origin, with a trajectory that could be considered somewhat uncertain, so uncertain that it may no longer seem very daring to ask





ourselves: are the Vincentian Congregations, such as the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, condemned to extinction? Do we have nothing more to look forward to, at least in the West, than a future that seems more like a geriatric organization rather than a community of missionaries and servants of the poor?

The adventure that we are about to begin responds only indirectly to these questions because we are attempting to tune into the station where the voice of the eternal caller is heard, the voice of the Evangelizer of the poor, the one who seduced the heart of Vincent de Paul. As a consequence, our uncertainties can be transformed into mystical options of mission and charity. This has been the purpose of several articles that we have published in recent years, as well as conferences and talks that we have been able to offer on the theme of a *Vincentian Vocational Culture*. Now, with the encouragement of Father Jorge Luis Rodríguez CM and Vinicius Teixeira CM, it has been decided that it would be appropriate to put these ideas into book form. To those confreres, my deep appreciation for their support and encouragement.

We must clarify that, in search of a thesis that would be understood very concretely in its analysis, we have been forced to exemplify the theme with some data that specifically concerns the Congregation of the Mission. Nevertheless, the method and content touch the global reality and offer possibilities to any branch of the Vincentian Family and to all those concerned with building a vocational culture.

Specifically, what is the thesis of this book? First of all, we want to offer a vaccine against any approach to the vocational issue that would attempt to resolve this matter in some



simplicistic manner. Unfortunately, those approaches are still seen quite frequently today. We refer to those preconceived responses which provide some affirmations that, seemingly more myth than truth, have become part of our lives and made us victims of an *ecclesial sclerosis*<sup>1</sup> that has been clearly denounced by Pope Francis. Perhaps this is the greatest of our challenges.

Second, we attempt to read the signs concerning the most essential elements of our vocational identity and contextualize this in a manner that is far removed from the polarizations that occurred during the 1970's and 1980's ... a chapter of our ecclesial history characterized by attempts at *aggiornamento* of which today, with cool heads, we can recognize successes and mistakes in a more balanced manner. Our reading of the chrism, more than fifty years after the Second Vatican Council (the same number of years that Vincent was removed from the Council of Trent), is presented to us as the key to reading the call to the New Evangelization, which presents us with the opportunity to see ourselves in front of a mirror and assume our role in the twenty-first century. It is there, right at that point, where we find the vocational culture as a horizon that impels us to walk, firmly rooted in our charism and with inventive charity as we confront the present challenges.

Therefore, we are not offering a manual for vocational ministers and the theme of a Vincentian vocational culture is not intended to be seen as a work strategy for the provinces. That would be like reducing an ever-flowing stream of water to a single glass of water. Nevertheless, in the greater number of cases, it has been the survival instinct that has aroused

<sup>1</sup> *Let us ask the Lord to free the Church from those who would make her grow old, encase her in the past, hold her back or keep her at a standstill* (Christus Vivit, #35).



interest in the subject of a vocational culture. This theme has fluctuated between being lines of action of community programs and, on other occasions, the category *vocation* has been infused into the being and doing of the institution.

When the latter occurs, the voice that was heard in Saint-Lazare on that Friday afternoon when Vincent de Paul crystallized, with his words, the nascent Vincentian vocational culture... that voice is revived:

*God is the one who calls us and who, from all eternity, has destined us to be Missioners, since he did not bring us to birth either one hundred years earlier or later, but precisely at the time of the institution of this Company. Consequently, we must neither seek nor expect rest, satisfaction, and blessings anywhere else but in the Congregation of the Mission, since that is the only place **God wants and desires us to be**<sup>2</sup>.*

I am sure that there have been any number of distinguished members of the Congregation of the Mission who, without

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<sup>2</sup> Vincent de Paul, *Correspondence, Conference, Documents*, translators: Helen Marie Law, DC (Vol. 1), Marie Poole, DC (Vol. 1-14), James King, CM (Vol. 1-2), Francis Germovnik, CM (Vol. 1-8, 13a-13b [Latin]), Esther Cavanagh, DC (Vol. 2), Ann Mary Dougherty, DC (Vol. 12); Evelyne Franc, DC (Vol. 13a-13b), Thomas Davitt, CM (Vol. 13a-13b [Latin]), Glennon E. Figge, CM (Vol. 13a-13b [Latin]), John G. Nugent, CM (Vol. 13a-13b [Latin]), Andrew Spellman, CM (Vol. 13a-13b [Latin]); edited: Jacqueline Kilar, DC (Vol. 1-2), Marie Poole, DC (Vol. 2-13b), Julia Denton, DC [editor-in-chief] (Vol. 3-10, 13a-13b), Paule Freeburg, DC (Vol. 3), Mirian Hamway, DC (Vol. 3), Elinor Hartman, DC (Vol. 4-10, 13a-13b), Ellen Van Zandt, DC (Vol. 9-13b), Ann Mary Dougherty (Vol. 11-12 and 14); annotated: John W. Carven, CM (Vol. 1-13b); New City Press, Brooklyn and Hyde Park, 1985-2014, volume XI, p. 98. Future references to this work will use the initials [CCD] followed by the volume number, followed by the page number, for example, CCD:XI:98.





ever speaking about a vocational culture, have lived it radically through their mysticism, mission and community life. That is why on each page of this book I can see the image of Ángel Plaza, CM (who enjoys the mission of heaven) or the face of Henry Kristen, CM and Alonso Núñez, CM, as well as the voice of so many young people whom I have been able to accompany through the service of vocational ministry ... today, beginning with Rogelio Díaz, CM (the first of more than a hundred) who demand, with their permanent search, an authentic radicalness, a prophetic voice and a vision of time before space (those elements that rejuvenate every charism and institution). Therefore, it is to them, with good reason, that I dedicate this work, because they have made me feel that here, in the mission of Christ, the evangelizer of the poor, is the place where God wants us.

*The Author*







## **PART ONE:**

# **INSERTED INTO A REAL-LIFE SITUATION**



People do not choose the time in which they are to live, nor have we chosen to be on pilgrimage during the twenty-first century. Yet, this is the only place where we can put down roots and bear fruit in a joyfully lived missionary vocation.

We are far removed from the foundational era<sup>3</sup>. Except for some isolated instances, Christianity no longer plays a prominent role in the political and social arena of the West, something that was typical of ecclesial institutions more than half a century ago. We could not be sure if Pablo Picasso were painting today, whether he would chose a Daughter of Charity to represent his work, *Science and Charity* because perhaps we are no longer the reference point that we were at the end of the nineteenth century ... perhaps we do not even occupy the interest of great artists (nor does it seem that this should be our desire today as it was in the past).

As is to be expected, we are not an island. Therefore, it is most natural that the social-religious panorama should be reflected in the internal dimensions of the Congregation of the Mission and other Vincentian congregations. We will see, in the first part, that congregational data and statistics must be considered in our reflection, but not as a problem that must be resolved. This will be discussed more fully in the second and third parts. First, however, we must understand the context of these congregational statistics and therefore, we will attempt to summarize some of the elements of the present reality. In this way we will be able to contrast the vocational situation with the institutional statistics and then attempt to respond to

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<sup>3</sup> The words that Vincent de Paul spoke during the October 29, 1638 conference to his followers, have inspired this book: *Those who enter a Congregation during the first century of its establishment –within the first hundred years– are called the first members* (CCD:XI:98).



the question that was asked during the 2018 Synod<sup>4</sup>: does the charism of Saint Vincent have a vocational proposal and a *formation model*<sup>5</sup> that responds to the felt needs and challenges that the contemporary world presents to us.

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<sup>4</sup> Final Document of the XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on *Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment*.

([http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/synod/documents/rc\\_synod\\_doc\\_20181027\\_doc-final-instrumentum-xvassemblea-giovani\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20181027_doc-final-instrumentum-xvassemblea-giovani_en.html)).

<sup>5</sup> With regard to Educational Institutions, the Synod questions the formation models that we offer in order to educate young men and women. This is a valid question if we understand the task of formation that is undertaken by Vincentian missionaries as an educational ministry that integrates the life of the individual from the perspective of one's proper charism and the five dimensions of every formation plan (cf. Final Document of 2018 Synod, #158).





## Chapter I:

### A CHALLENGING VOCATIONAL CONTEXT

Around the year 2000, numerous analyses of the current era were produced, almost always using the word *postmodern*. Most studies, with a hermeneutical frame of reference, established relationships between previous eras and the new situation, thus highlighting advances and setbacks or, in some cases, seeking ways to participate in the building of a better world.

In our case, we cannot overlook the situation in which we live because this is the place where we have been called to live our vocation with creative fidelity. This, however, does not mean that we should dedicate many pages to an exhaustive analysis of the reality. Many such studies exist, ranging from the serious and recognized contributions of Zygmunt Baumann to the best-seller books of individuals such as Yuval Noah Harari's whose writings are entertaining but contain little philosophical consistency.

For this reason, we are in accord with the data on the youth reality that was analyzed in the synodal process for the XV Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops that was held in Rome (October 2018) and whose theme was: *Young people, the faith and vocational discernment*. In our opinion, a successful process was followed, beginning with the Preparatory Document and the *Instrumentum Laboris*, then followed by an opportunity that allowed young people throughout the world to be consulted and interact through the various social networks (the bishops listened with open hearts). That is why the Final Document of the Synod and the Post-



Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, should be considered as documents worthy of serious study.

### **Young men and women viewed from the perspective of the Synod and *Christus Vivit***

Above all, Pope Francis almost always offers us a smile. The theme of young men and women also makes him smile and those who have followed his steps will have no doubts about the hope that Francis places in young people.

He became Pope in time to participate in the World Youth Day celebration that was held in Rio de Janeiro (2013) and had an active role in the celebration in Krakow (2016) whose theme was mercy. With the youthful air that characterizes him, we saw him with all his animation at the World Youth Day celebration in Panama (2019).

Along these lines, Thomas Leoncini's interview with Pope Francis is one of those journalistic works worth reading<sup>6</sup>. I highlight reading this work in order to see beyond the logical problem of young people and thus put a human face on this really important issue<sup>7</sup>. The Pope's prophetic vision is furthermore revealed as he turns his gaze toward the peripheries and finds there young and old people in the group of victims resulting from this throw-away culture. He offers these individuals a path of hope and optimism<sup>8</sup> and even the

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<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis, *God is Young*, A conversation with Thomas Leoncini, translated from the Italian by Anne Milano Appel, Random House, New York, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> *I like to think that youth does not exist, only young people*, *Ibid.*, p.3. We find this same idea expressed later in *Christus Vivit: Youth does not exist: there exist only young people, each with the reality of his or her own life* (#71).

<sup>8</sup> *Old dreamers and young prophets are our uprooted society's path to salvation: Two generations of discarded throwaways can save us all*, *Ibid.*, p.19.





ability to change *youth* into a theological category from which to understand the mystery of God<sup>9</sup> (and consequently, the mystery of the human person). What a wonderful preamble into the reality of the twenty-first century, so often demonized when compared with other eras of *ecclesial glory*!

For its part, the Synod on *Young people, the faith and vocational discernment*<sup>10</sup> that inspired Pope Francis to write *Christus Vivit*, skillfully described the reality of this new generation of young men and women.

For example, this document presents young people as a part of a society in which they suffer and experience marginalization, are victims of forced migration, live dramatic stories of separation, encounter, vulnerability and violence. They are culturally colonized and part of the current of secularization. They are popularly characterized by a preference for image and feelings and the digital environment is for them like water for fish. Of course, on this list, hardly representative of a series of problems, we find realities that are more common in some regions than in others ... but these realities are always related to those challenges.

Why not view the themes of the various synods, the New Evangelization (2012)<sup>11</sup>, the Family (2015), Young People, the

<sup>9</sup> *God is young! God is the Eternal One who has no time, but is able to renew and rejuvenate Himself and all things continually. The most distinctive attributes of the young are also His. He is young because He "makes all things new" and loves innovation, Ibid., p. 40.*

<sup>10</sup> The fourth chapter of the first part of the Final Document of the 2018 Synod entitled, *Being Young Today*, points out another series of aspects that could be further explored. We limit ourselves here to those aspects highlighted throughout the synodal process.

<sup>11</sup> Even though this first theme corresponds to the Pontificate of Benedict XVI, nevertheless the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, could be viewed as Francis' magna carta.



Faith and Vocational Discernment (2018) as prophetic callings that were discerned by the Pope and that help us, the sons and daughters of Saint Vincent de Paul, to understand the signs of the time?

In the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Christus Vivit*, Pope Francis offers us a series of criteria with regard to youth and vocational discernment, which have inspired much of the work that we present. In this document the Pope requests that the reality of young men and women be read *in a positive manner*. He invites us to put aside *prepackaged answers and ready-made solutions that do not allow their real questions to emerge and do not enable us to face the challenges they pose* (*Christus Vivit*, #65). Furthermore, the Pope insists on telling young people that they are the “now” of God: *we cannot just say that young people are the future of our world. They are its present; even now, they are helping to enrich it* (*Christus Vivit*, #64).

Having established these insightful principles, Pope Francis highlights the challenges of the reality of young people that the Synod had already pointed out in the Final Document. Given the many different youth cultures and realities, the Pope limits himself to two aspects:

1. *Young people are living in a world in crisis* (*Christus Vivit*, #72) where they encounter, among other things: crime, violence, drug trafficking, terrorism, ideologies that exploit them, abortion, pornography and a culture of alienation.
2. *Desires, hurts and longings* (*Christus Vivit*, #81-85): here some of the following issues are highlighted: the sexual identity of men and women and homosexuality,







the possibility of inserting artificial elements into organisms (cyborgs), manipulation of people, failures, frustrated desires, guilt-feelings, a desire for God, albeit still vague and far from knowledge of the God of revelation, sensitivity to art, to nature and to community building experiences.

The Apostolic Exhortation then refers to the trilogy of the digital environment, migrants as an epitome of our time, and ending every form of abuse. These are elements that are taken directly from the conclusions of the Synod ... and at some later time, research should be done on each of those aspects.

In general terms, this is the reality in the midst of which the seed of a Vincentian vocational culture grows (or should grow). It is appropriate that we allow ourselves to be challenged and questioned by the words of Pope Francis ... words that must resonate in the heart of the Vincentian Family: *I encourage communities to examine, respectfully and seriously, the situation of their young people, in order to find the most fitting ways of providing them with pastoral care (Christus Vivit, #103)*

### **Youth tendencies**

The hermeneutics of Pope Francis put us on the alert against every *demonization* of the contemporary world and of new generations. We already know that Vincentian institutions and branches, which are beginning to age, long to see rejuvenated faces in their communities, but many times that desire is accompanied by indifference, disinterest and limited commitment to young people.





Thinking optimistically, as the Synod and Pope Francis propose, should not prevent us from pointing out some important challenges that the current situation presents to the process of creating a Vincentian vocational culture. Let us look at some of them.

## 1. The problem of liquidity

Baumann<sup>12</sup> is a classic author, known for his concept of *liquidity* with which he has characterized his well-researched studies on contemporary society. *Liquid modernity* is the underlying concept that has led him to the determination to treat themes with the same adjective: liquid time, liquid relationships, liquid love ... and the list could go on infinitely.

The primary metaphor is focused on the weakness of molecular interactions, typical of liquid matter, which gives them their unique property. Although the volume of liquid matter is constant, their shape adapts in accord with the space or container into which this liquid is placed. Such adaptation Baumann applies to the lifestyle and relationships of contemporary society and contrasts this liquidity with the solidity of a manner of understanding, feeling and living in a previous era.

Thus, the challenge: how to propose a definitive life option to a society in which everything is disposable, usable and then discarded ... liquidity gives no definitive value to almost anything.

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<sup>12</sup> Zygmunt Baumann is one of the most notable authors of this era. He was born in 1925 and died in 2017. His Jewish origins and his experiences during the Second World War are the inspiration for his primary work, *Modernity and the Holocaust*. As a philosopher and a sociologist, he published a number of works in which he developed the theme of liquid modernity.





For example, we see that this society is composed of various human, liquid relationships that enable one to live for a time in one way and then later, live in a completely different way. Such is the situation with regard to the models of family life: we have the “traditional” family model of mother-father-children, but we also have the model of mother-children, or two mothers-children or two fathers-children or perhaps a model that has become more fashionable, “me and my pet”. Liquidity does not only refer to family relationships but can be applied to friendships, work relationships, family relationships outside of the immediate family, etc.

It is precisely to these young men and women, who have grown up in this liquid society and who perceive this as normal, that we proclaim and present a vocational option that demands deep and harmonious human relationships in light of a call that supposes a lifelong commitment of dedication.

## 2. Individualism-subjectivism

We know that the Christian vocation (the basis of a Vincentian vocation) encompasses an element that can be adapted in every era but that is also, as Vincent would say, *unwavering with regard to the end* (CCD:II:402)<sup>13</sup>. The challenge, then, is how to present our values-virtues and the evangelical counsels-vows when, as a result of liquid modernity, there are no absolute references to good or evil but everything conforms to the subjective law where pleasure reigns. This is so prevalent that we could state the following as the law of social life: *I like it, therefore, it is good*.

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<sup>13</sup> The complete sentence reads: *To be unwavering with regard to the end and gentle with regard to the means of arriving at it* (CCD:II:402).



*With the crisis of the concept of community arises a rampant individualism in which no one is a companion to another on their journey, but rather “the others” are antagonists to beware of. This “subjectivism” has undermined the foundations of modernity, has made it fragile and has created a situation in which there are no points of reference because everything has dissolved into a kind of liquidity<sup>14</sup>.*

As a result of this situation, individuals do not believe in an objective truth but in many relative truths, apparently adjustable to each individual. There is no ethical point of reference, but rather moral principles coincide with some current trend and the result is that a certain idolatry to individuality is developed ... one that is placed above the common good. Thus, any expression of an objective search for criteria or moral points of reference becomes the target of ridicule and accusations.

### 3. The crisis of love

The lack of ethical-moral references can also be viewed from a psychological perspective as an affectivity crisis<sup>15</sup>. This highlights a significant difficulty from the anthropological perspective of the Christian vocation<sup>16</sup> and its relationship to

<sup>14</sup> Humberto Eco, *Da la Estupidez a la locura* [From Stupidity to Craziness], Kindle Edition.

<sup>15</sup> Here we have a possible common meeting point for family ministry and vocational ministry which offers a very appropriate missionary space in the communities where we serve. This is an example of the challenge to create a vocational culture in the mission.

<sup>16</sup> The research of Father Rulla is noteworthy in this area. We recommend: Luigi M. Rulla, Franco Imoda, Jocie Ridick, *La Vocación Cristiana. 2. Confirmaciones Existenciales* [The Christian vocation. 2. Existential confirmations], Salamanca, 94.



*love* as a vocational foundation that supposes the integration of the human dimension in a plan for life in which the person is capable of loving and able to allow him/herself to be loved.

In other words, we have to know how to develop, above and beyond the structures of a seminary or a house of formation, a pedagogy that is able to proclaim the gospel of love in a manner that allows people to encounter love, to experience love, to learn to live in love, and to feel happy in being able to communicate that same love to men and women who are poor. We have to realize that we must achieve this goal in the midst of a wounded society, where young people suffer a certain “orphanhood” because they are children of a liquid home in which love is also liquid. That reality was reflected during the 2018 Synod: *Many of the young people present at the Synod, also expressed gratitude to those who have accompanied them and they emphasized the great need for adults who can serve as points of reference (Christus Vivit, #99)*

Will the various branches/associations/institutions of the Vincentian Family be those points of reference for young people? Do we, in our institutional structures, have those individuals who know how to accompany young people? Being content in feeling that we are being faithful to the charism is a symptom of the problem of being turned in on ourselves, which condemns us to fruitlessness.

#### **4. More feelings and less reasoning**

*That which is rational does not sell. Saying someone is rational usually associates that individual with being rigid or cold or insensitive. What sells today is exuberance,*

*feeling, overflowing passion, instinct, spontaneity and improvisation*<sup>17</sup>.

If in the reality of past decades (and in the mind of some still mentally trapped in those years) there was a principle that the formation of a member for the Congregation must be excellent in its academic dimension (which is still true) in order to be able to dialogue with an increasingly rational society, then today we would have to say that arguments and good reasons are not sufficient unless they also touch one's feelings.

In a conference that I gave on new vocational settings, a young religious woman represented this theme by drawing the human being of a half century ago with a huge head and a small heart. Then she drew the human person of today with a head that was barely visible and with a heart that extended well beyond the chest area. Isn't that a good representation of this reality?

Here the means of communication and the press (and the *fake news*) find a gold mine. Reasons are not important nor is grounding information on principles ... what matters is how can the media create feelings and reactions and get the adrenaline moving.

We proclaim the Good News. Yes, vocational ministry is an essential part of the New Evangelization and therefore, with even greater conviction we state that we must learn to proclaim the soundness of the gospel of vocation to this liquid generation. The greatness of the news does not guarantee the effectiveness of the message, especially if we do not know how

<sup>17</sup> José María Rodríguez Olaizola, *Hoy es ahora. Gente sólida para tiempos líquidos* [Now is the time: Solid people for liquid times], Cantabria, 2014, Kindle edition.



to proclaim it in the proper way and with the proper language. The first part is given by God, the eternal caller; the second part depends on us, on the processes we create, and on our ability to be *yeast in the dough*.

## 5. Immediacy-impatience

In a society that has the shopping mall as its model and in which relationships are viewed from the perspective of consumer goods and services, it is quite logical that anything that involves waiting for an answer or delaying a solution generates a certain anxious chaos.

In short: *the short-term rules; the medium-term is a nuisance; the long-term sucks!*<sup>18</sup>

We see, then, the difficulty that the world of immediacy presents to the process of formation for people discerning a vocation to the consecrated life (such a vocation involves stages, discernment, waiting on providence, walking along zigzagging rather than straight paths)<sup>19</sup>. That is where the contrast becomes most evident ... but that is also where we have the opportunity to evangelize the philosophy of the short-term and to show that *time is greater than space*<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> While we highlight here the vocation to the consecrated life, it becomes increasingly clearer that the vocation of every baptized person to be a missionary-disciple also presents us with the challenge of being able to offer these persons comprehensive formation processes and not just sporadic activities and formation sessions.

<sup>20</sup> Pope Francis is most insistent on this principle. We find this developed in *Evangelii Gaudium* (#222-225) and in *Christus Vivit* (#297). This principle is found in other exhortations and we come to understand that this is one of the philosophical pillars of his pastoral ministry.

## 6. The question of meaninglessness

There is a growing trend in the consumption of self-help books and the proliferation of suicide which, according to the report of the World Health Organization, in 2019 reached a total of 800,000 cases (one person committing suicide every 40 seconds). This reveals to us the crisis with regard to meaning in life ... a situation that human beings have not been able to resolve despite the facility to obtain limitless material goods and the unbridled pleasure that is at their disposal.

Meaninglessness is the final result of the present tendencies that we have pointed out: a society of liquid relationships, a subjectivity that replaces any objective search for good and truth, a lack of love that creates wounded individuals and people who are addicted to feelings, an anxious impatience that does not allow people to journey, with stability, toward a goal beyond the immediate.

Even before Victor Frankl<sup>21</sup> became aware of this challenge, the Gospel of vocation had already dealt with it through the invitation to follow Jesus Christ ... an authentic offer that fills people with missionary purpose and passion. Nevertheless, the task of sowing in a context where it seems that stones and thorns can easily choke the vocational seed in a web of meaninglessness is equally daunting. That is why it is necessary to go beyond what is perceived with the naked eye, because in order to find fertile ground, one must journey along a path.

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<sup>21</sup> Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Beacon Press, 1959; accessed on 07/02/2020 at: <https://www.booksfree.org/mans-search-for-meaning-by-viktor-e-frankl-pdf/>





## Reality and vocational ministry

The reader will notice that we have used young men and women as a sampling of reality, much like the microbiologist who fills one bottle with water that he takes from an immense pool. This sampling is intended to help us understand the whole context in which we have to act.

We have said from the beginning that we do not intend to offer a handbook for vocational ministers. We do, however, hope to use this interest and concern for vocations in order to broaden the perspective so that we move in the direction of creating a vocational culture with a Vincentian identity.

Therefore, we are not focused on analyzing and studying young people or offering lines of action that will attract them, even though that is what is often expected of those involved in vocational ministry. That task of *catching vocations* would be a proper task only if we could go back some seventy years or more and then allow that misguided nostalgia for the past to overwhelm us in such a way that we begin to walk with our eyes in the back of our head.

At the same time, a superficial reading of what we have stated could also prostitute the concept of “vocational culture” and lead to “heretical” conclusions, such as supposing that vocations of special consecration are a thing of the past and that our task will be better accomplished the more we know how to transmit our charism to the laity so that, before our imminent extinction, that charism has been instilled and is alive in laymen and women.

Fundamentally, the inability to dream, which also accompanied many contemporaries of Vincent de Paul, is rooted in a pessimistic vision of reality in which individuals

long for what is no longer possible and suffer interiorly because they cannot discover how to make *love inventive unto infinity* (CCD:XI:131).

We cannot jump from one conclusion to another without coming to an understanding that this is precisely how suicides are created (yes, even in communities). It would be wrong to conclude that the vocation to the Congregation of the Mission or the Company of the Daughters of Charity, or any other congregation inspired by the Vincentian charism, is no longer valid in the twenty-first century, for the sole reason that the seminaries that once housed countless vocations have become places about which we recount glorious stories about yesterday.

No, ultimately the charismatic insight of Vincent de Paul, which gave him the ability *to discern pathways where others only saw walls and to recognize possibilities where others only saw peril* (*Christus Vivit*, #67), is the art of discerning that today we must not only survive this era that we cowardly refer to as *post-Christian* but that we must do so because fidelity to our missionary vocation demands this as a primary need.

*What if this culture were pre-Christian? What if people were waiting for something, someone, salvation, liberation from the terror of meaninglessness, death, suffering, war? ... What if people were waiting for happiness, fullness of life ... yes, life forever? It is clear that today men and women may not be fully aware of this waiting or may reduce it to the number of days that they inhabit this earth, without making connections of any kind, especially without relating this process of*



*waiting to God, without knowing that, in reality, all this means that the only desire that is present in the heart of each man and woman is the desire to see the face of the Eternal<sup>22</sup>!*



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<sup>22</sup> Amedeo Cencini, *Abrazar el Futuro con Esperanza* [Embrace the future with hope], Cantabria, 2018, Kindle Edition.







## Chapter II:

### A LOOK IN THE MIRROR

Reality is not only an object of study, but it is also a source for reflection and a motivating factor for pastoral conversion. Therefore, a look into the congregational mirror could be healthy as we attempt to lay the foundation for an authentic Vincentian vocational culture.

In this second chapter, we will utilize the statistics of the Congregation of the Mission and present them as an example of the analysis that should be done in the same way with any other Vincentian branch. In the same way, the issue of stability and, above all, the problem of mediocrity deserve reflection especially in regard to vocations for the consecrated life but should not be limited exclusively to that vocation.

#### Numbers and statistics

We have three sources to view, in detail, the numbers of the Congregation. Since 1853 there has been a printed catalogue<sup>23</sup> and at the same time, statistics are published every year in

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<sup>23</sup> *The first edition of Catalogue des masions et du personnel de la Congrégation de la Mission appeared in 1853. It underwent various changes, such as moving from a biannual to an annual publication in 1875 ... the text was in French ... and it was only in 1964, with the transfer of the General Curia to Rome, that a Latin version appeared (cf. John E. Rybolt, CM, *The Vincentians: A General History of the Congregation of the Mission*, Editors: Joseph E. Dunne, Benjamin Walters, Andrew Yankech, , Volume 4, *Expansions and Reactions (1843-1878)*, New City Press, Hyde Park, NY, 2014, p. 45.*

*Vincentiana* and more recently, we have the digital catalogue that allows us to see the numbers in real time<sup>24</sup>.

We do not intend to give a detailed analysis of the numbers even though such an analysis would be a very interesting. Such a study could easily divert us from our primary focus. Therefore, let us specifically point out the data that interests us.

The Congregation of the Mission has just under 500 houses in the world and more than 3,000 missionaries, of whom 123 are brothers<sup>25</sup>. All in all, at first glance we are still a rather large congregation, but let us compare the current data with that of the year 2000 in order to expand our analysis.

**Table 1: Data 2000 vs 2017**

|                                  | Statistics for 2000 | Statistics for 2019 |
|----------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| <b>Houses</b>                    | 557                 | 492                 |
| ➤ <b>Priests*</b>                | (3,144)             | (2,987)             |
| ➤ <b>Brothers</b>                | (199)               | (123)               |
| <b>Incorporated Missionaries</b> | 3,343               | 3,110               |
| <b>Admitted Students</b>         | 614                 | 540                 |
| <b>Aspirants</b>                 | 873                 | 582                 |

\* For this study we have included incorporated students and deacons in the number of priests.

Notice that within the course of two decades:

1. We have closed 65 houses.

<sup>24</sup> Thus, it will be possible to find some differences between the numbers that we present here (the digital catalogue) and the printed catalogue which will always be out of date with regard to the digital catalogue, in the same way that the annual statistics, which although they are more specific with regard to the data that is presented, nevertheless, they come to us with a margin of several months delay.

<sup>25</sup> Digital catalogue, March 24, 2020



2. There has been a 233 decrease among the confreres/missionaries. It should be noted that among the brothers there has been a decrease of 76 which represents a decrease of 28.19% while the decrease among the priests has been 7.41%.
3. We could take an average for those years and conclude that the Congregation has 12 less missionaries every year ... and that we have a constant decrease of between 6 and 9 confreres.
4. The decrease in applicants is 291, but the group with the lowest decrease is admitted students ... a difference of 74 since the beginning of the century.

This data is striking in the sense that if we add the number of admitted students (540) and that of aspirants (582), we obtain a total of 1,122 which, when compared to the total number of currently incorporated missionaries (3,110), represents just over one third. From a numerical perspective, we could say that, with the understanding that initial formation will continue for ten years, in the course of a decade, a third of the personnel of the Congregation could be relieved.

Obviously, that last statement has to be read in conjunction with two variables: the instability of those being formed and geography. That means that the number of admitted students and, with greater reason, the number of aspirants does not represent, with certainty, the exact number of future missionaries in the Congregation. We will talk about the issue of stability in the following section. What is clear about these statistics is that the number of admitted students indicates a very different distribution of missionaries on the world map of the Congregation.



**Table 2: Admission by continent**

| <b>Continent</b> | <b>Admitted: 2000</b> | <b>Admitted: 2017</b> |
|------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Asia             | 152                   | 265                   |
| Africa           | 166                   | 115                   |
| America          | 164                   | 105                   |
| Europe           | 121                   | 50                    |
| Oceania          | 11                    | 5                     |

We can clearly see on the map of the Congregation that the new members are not found in Europe where there was a great concentration of missionaries during the first four centuries of its existence. Rather we are seeing increasing numbers in Asia and stable or slowing decreasing numbers in Africa. The decrease in Oceania is barely noticeable as a result of the low number of missionaries and admitted students.

If we compare these numbers with other missionary congregations or religious orders, we will discover that we are in a similar situation<sup>26</sup>.

We have resisted dealing with the numerical issue on the provincial level and in accord with the various conferences of visitors. This has provided us with a certain ease with respect to the published statistics. At the same time, we do not want to focus on continuing the provincial structure which, without taking away their importance as living entities of the Congregation, are means and not ends (the gospel of vocation<sup>27</sup> is definitely an end and that is our concern).

<sup>26</sup> Even though this is not an official source, David M. Cheney's blog can be most helpful with regard to numerical data. He provides us with numerical comparisons between the Jesuits, Franciscans, the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, the Redemptorists and other congregations. Cf., <https://davids-ruminations.blogspot.com/2020/05/religious-orders-in-recent-times-top.htm?m=1>.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Amedeo Cencini, *No Cuentan los Números* [The Numbers Don't Count], Madrid, 2012.





With regard to these first conclusions based on the Congregation's statistics, let us ask two questions which we will attempt to answer in subsequent pages:

1. How do we engage in the ministry of vocations in those places where there is a constant decrease in numbers?
2. How do we provide thorough admittance processes and purification of motivation in those places where there are many vocations?

### **Statistics with regard to stability**

We have stated that, taking into consideration the number of newly incorporated members, the annual decrease in confreres is 12 missionaries. This decrease in personnel is not necessarily the result of death<sup>28</sup>, but also resolves around the issue of *stability*. In other words, not all the missionaries who take perpetual vows necessarily live and die in the Congregation of the Mission. The numbers can shed some light on this point.

The situation of confreres leaving the Congregation after having taken vows is not something new. During the years immediately following the Second Vatican Council there was a significant number of individuals who departed from almost every congregation. That was a theme that was of great concern to the curia at that time<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> *During the year 2019, 68 confreres died and 67 members were ordained priests ... I invite you to pray for the members of these two groups* (Tomâz Mavrič, CM, Circular Letter at the time of the March 2020 Tempo Forte).

<sup>29</sup> We rely on the data of José Oriol Baylach (*Vincentiana*, 1986), analyzed by Miguel Perez Flores in *Revestirse del Espíritu de Cristo. Expresión de la Identidad Vicentina* [Clothe yourself with the Spirit of Christ. Expression of the Vincentian Identity], p. 403-405.



During a span of eighteen years, from 1968-1986, there were 1,078<sup>30</sup> departures from the Congregation, of which 199 were legitimate. What was the reason for this number of departures?

*In 1985, Father McCullen, Superior General, sent a questionnaire to the Visitors and their respective councils. Among the questions was the following: why are some members leaving the Congregation and going to a diocese? The responses that were given to Father McCullen highlighted difficulties in performing ministry in the community.<sup>31</sup>*

During the 2016 General Assembly and a discussion on departures from the Congregation of the Mission, the Secretary General presented the following numbers with regard to departures during the six years preceding the Assembly, that is, from 2010- 2016.

**Table 3: Departures 2010-2016**

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| <b>Total departures</b>                      | <b>133</b> |
| Incardination into a diocese                 | 42         |
| With dispensation <i>ab omnibus oneribus</i> | 37         |
| Expelled <i>Ipsa Facto</i>                   | 30         |
| With dispensation of the Superior General    | 13         |
| Expelled with process                        | 11         |

In addition to departures, we ought to view the number of confreres who are absent. According to the data at the Secretariat in the Curia in Rome, in 2018 there were 160

<sup>30</sup> We do not believe it opportune to go into detail about how many confreres sought incardination into a diocese or how many departures were brothers. Our focus here is on the vow of stability.

<sup>31</sup> Miguel Perez Flores, *op.cit.*, p.405



individuals in this situation, categorized in the following manner<sup>32</sup>:

**Table 4: Absent 2018**

| Group   | Characteristics  | Number |
|---|--|--------|
| With the permission of the Visitor            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Absent no more than a year.</li><li>Maintain active and passive voice.</li></ul>         | 18     |
| With the permission of the superior general   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Absent 1-3 years.</li><li>Do not have active or passive voice.</li></ul>                 | 10     |
| Illegitimate absences                         | Are living outside the community for more than 6 months with no permission that protects them.                                 | 109    |
| Awaiting incardination into a diocese         | Have expressed their intention to the Superior General and are involved in a canonical process that can take up to five years. | 17     |
| Awaiting dispensation from the clerical state | Are awaiting the indult that will release them from the clerical state.  | 6      |

Here we must recognize the recent efforts of the General Curia to put some order into this difficult situation. At the end of 2019, the number of absent confreres is 131.

We want to highlight two problems represented by these numbers:

1. The data in the above two tables reveals that the number of absent confreres is sufficient to form one of the largest provinces in the Congregation. Sadly, however, this data reveals a certain deficiency in our process of initial and on-going formation.
2. Of the total number of absent confreres, those illegitimately absent are the largest group. This creates a deeper concern: How is it possible that an individual who has spent a minimum of eight years in a relationship with the Congregation, has taken permanent vows,

<sup>32</sup> For this study, we follow the general information that was provided by Father Guiseppe Turati, CM, Secretary-General.



and yet has not developed a *vocational sensitivity*<sup>33</sup> that enables him to experience the need to put his canonical situation in order especially since we are talking about an institution that has been an important part of his life?

Looking at these numbers, the problem of a formation model is revealed and, therefore, the need for a vocational culture with Vincentian roots.

### **A further look at the problem of stability**

A few years ago, Father Getulio Mota Grossi, from the Province of Rio de Janeiro, provided a perspective that enables us to view the problem of stability in terms other than numbers:

*For a long time, our fourth vow has been mistakenly understood more as a vow of remaining in the Congregation rather than of fidelity to service on behalf of the poor ... Our Constitutions and Statutes, redacted in 1984, did not clearly and expressly resolve this matter when they stated: “By our special vow of **stability** we vow to spend our whole lives in the Congregation fulfilling its purpose, performing the works assigned to us by superiors according to our Constitutions and Statutes”.*

*The article in our Constitutions makes explicit the “when” and the “where” ... but the very core of the vow?<sup>34</sup>*

<sup>33</sup> On this point we highlight one of the great challenges of a vocational culture, the problem of vocational sensitivity.

<sup>34</sup> Gerutlio Mota Grossi, *Um Místico da Missão, Vicente de Paulo* [Vincent de Paul: A mystic of mission], Belo Horizonte, 2016, 62-63.



Fortunately, the 2010 General Assembly that took place in Paris, wanted to give a more juridical content to the vow of stability and created the present Statute, which reads:

*Provinces, local communities, and each confrere shall be committed seriously to deepen the vow of stability, which includes the total gift of oneself in following Christ, the evangelizer of the poor and the faithfulness to remain in the Congregation of the Mission throughout one's life (Statute #18).*

We could debate the wording and its effectiveness in clarifying the authentic and profound meaning of the vow of stability. The problem of a vocational culture, however, is not resolved with some juridical formulation nor can we claim some magical change in the congregational reality as a result of the formulation of this new statute.

The continued existence of any institution depends entirely on its ability to connect people's lives to a series of values and criteria that are held in common (*a common perspective*) and thus, develop a *sensitivity* that enables the members to position themselves in a certain manner in the midst of the world. Furthermore, those values and criteria should also guide their personal plans and daily decisions so that their lifestyle reveals those same values and criteria (*pedagogy*). The development of this lifestyle is what we call "culture". There can be no doubt, as in any institution that has more than a century long tradition, that the Congregation of the Mission also represents a culture, which in light of its foundational event, has created an attitude, a sensitivity and a way of living that today is embodied in different realities.

Within this congregational culture we have the situation in which more than one hundred members are living outside its structures and this situation has become normal. That situation, however, is problematic. But we have a deeper problem because these members are referred to as *confreres present but absent*, and that, from the perspective of a vocational culture, in one of the primary difficulties that needs further reflection.

*The real problem of religious or priestly life is not the critical, objectively problematic situation of priests, brothers and sisters, but rather this mass of “consecrated” individuals who live subjectively calm, undisturbed, unmoved by situations objectively critical. In other words, individuals who experience absolutely no crisis when this is precisely what they should be experiencing<sup>35</sup>.*

Although it is possible to quantify the number of confreres canonically absent from the Congregation, nevertheless, we cannot provide a number for those confreres who are physically present in the various houses of the Congregation, but live a lifestyle that is foreign to that of the Little Company.

Unfortunately, we often act from the perspective of a false charity that does not reflect the evangelical mercy that can transform people who are open to the process of conversion. So often it has become taboo to confront the problem of those who live their vocation in a fragmented, compartmentalized manner and are the cause of scandal and unnecessary problems. These are confreres who are always demanding a

<sup>35</sup> Amedeo Cencini, *La Hora de Dios. La Crisis en la Vida del Creyente* [The hour of God. The Crisis in the Life of the Believer], Bogota, 2015, p. 49.

transfer from one house to another and always seem to find some problem or difficulty with the confreres in the house where they are living. These are confreres who are often treated as *sacred cows* because we feel uncomfortable confronting these pathological vocational situations. In fact, we can begin to view any such confrontation as a terrible sin against the charity that we preach.

We are not referring here to confreres who are experiencing a difficult time. In fact, we should understand that crises are a necessary part of the life and vocation of any mature adult<sup>36</sup>. Those situations of crisis, from the perspective of identity, lead individuals to personal integration, and in our situation lead individuals to their missionary vocational option.

No, we are not speaking about confreres in difficult situation. Rather we are referring to those individuals who have not confronted in an appropriate manner those moments of crisis. These are the individuals who present the greatest difficulty to the Congregation. Yet, as in every culture, so also in congregational life, individuals come to believe that such has always been the reality, and since that is our present reality, it will continue to be our reality (*a fallacy that creates disgraceful situations*).

The words of Amedeo Cencini are not an exaggeration: *a frustrated priest is always a priest in danger*<sup>37</sup>? What danger are we speaking about? Danger of losing a vocation if this missionary should decide to leave the Congregation? Abandoning the Congregation is not, in itself, an appropriate

<sup>36</sup> This is quite different from a childish denial which characterizes the culture of mediocrity.

<sup>37</sup> Amedeo Cencini, *La Hora de Dios. La Crisis en la Vida del Creyente* [The hour of God. The Crisis in the Life of the Believer], Bogota, p. 43.

response to some crisis<sup>38</sup>. Nevertheless, we must understand, that in many cases, to request a dispensation from vows and the clerical state, painful as this might be for all concerned, can ultimately be the most honest option for establishing community renewal and healing.

In the context of the decline in personnel in many western provinces, there is a danger of prioritizing works to the extent that any candidate is accepted into the seminary (thus, there is no adequate discernment and screening process). At the same time, we run the risk of offering deficient formation processes because there is not sufficient personnel, much less competent confreres, to engage in the service of formation. Thus, initial formation is done in a very haphazard manner. Still, there is an even greater danger, one that has not been sufficiently highlighted, namely, a belief that we are solving our problems by supporting missionary personnel but doing so without a culture of on-going formation. Thus, we become more concerned with results and numbers than with the quality of life of the confreres. Consequently, there is no assimilation of the missionary-Vincentian dimensions of one's vocation, but rather an undercurrent is created in which the confreres are invited to live certain vocational traits which are almost always highlighted in order to avoid looking at the real problem.

When the works become more important than fidelity to the foundational spirit, it is a sign that something has gone wrong in our journey and we have not yet become aware of what has

<sup>38</sup> In fact, such individuals need to be accompanied and we must struggle alongside those confreres who find themselves having to confront serious problems. Such accompaniment should involve a process of seeking personal-vocational integration. This should be done not from the perspective of having the confrere remain with us, like the furniture in a house which is also there but is lifeless and fruitless. We seek to revitalize a vocation and not forcefully sustain it.





happened. Perhaps we have not wanted to stop the ship in which we are sailing in order to check the engine which might need to be repaired. Yet going down into the engine room, into the area where the machines responsible for moving the large vessel are located, can itself create certain crises and discomforts that one may wish to avoid ... but in the long-term, such avoidance is suicidal.

### **The pandemic of mediocrity**

*There was a legend, supposedly imaginary and without foundation, in which the members of a certain congregation, dedicated to the mission, had the opportunity to reflect on and evaluate their lives. The chosen facilitator offered various themes for reflection which included creative fidelity, personal and pastoral conversion, and especially the temptation to make certain concessions that so often terminate in clerical scandals that the news delights in reporting. Some of those present felt a certain antipathy for the issues, others considered the numbers exaggerated and were even unaware of the reality that was being presented because their great experience had taught them something other than that which this theoretical speaker was presenting. On the other hand, there were others whose hearts were burning and who had a genuine desire to listen to all the advice of the presenter.*

*Finally, it was time for the community to make some decisions. While the President of the*



*Assembly took his place, the missionaries looked at one another. They were remembering some wonderful moments in their life together as a community and wanted to erase from their memory some of the more serious problems. They knew that they had often overlooked these problems so as not to bother anyone or lose the joy of those happy moments.*

*Together they had acted properly in resolving several problems of their institution. Not all the problems, however, were confronted and this was done to avoid hurting certain individuals. In the name of prudence, the leader of the group had been delegated to bury the community problems that were never to be spoken about. Such had been the procedure for quite some time and it seemed best to maintain that procedure although in actuality, everyone longed for something different.*

*Then came the time to establish clear directions toward the aforementioned conversion since it seemed that many were concerned about their community dying in the not too distant future although not before having passed through a stage in which their houses were transformed into geriatric centers.*

*In the midst of such reflections, one of the members, with the look of one who is about to proclaim the ninth beatitude that is missing from the Sermon on the Mount, rose to speak and pronounced as a single sentence the most*





*harmonious truth inscribed in the unconscious of each of those present: "Above all else there is charity, and we ought to be merciful because here we have all made mistakes!"*

*Those words arrived like water that was intended to put out the fire in the hearts of the well-intentioned members, who could hardly contain the emotion of the applause, solemnly nodding their heads and glancing to their side in search of support from one another so that if someone was going to fall they might fall together, hopefully making the fall less dangerous.*

*In this way, those who were uncomfortable with the subject, resumed their customary calm. Those who considered the presenter naïve, gave thanks to that divine power who supports them at times when life seems to abandon them. Those who burned with a desire for conversion, found a prophetic voice that enlightened their reasoning and made them satisfied with the community harmony that seemed to reign at least for the duration of their assembly.*

*Thus, with a single stroke, the status quo of that company has been reassured now that the members are sure of being more mature after having participated in said formation session.*

These lines were written during a time of pandemic. For several weeks now, the news has been focused on the hundreds of thousands of people who have been infected and died as a result of COVID-19. This is a real tragedy that has created

suffering throughout the world. Interestingly, living in a third world country, I can feel and experience how culture reflects people's attitudes and sensitivities in different ways. Some people are responsible and abide by the established health measures while others continue to live their lives, thinking only of themselves and believing they are immune to any real danger while at the same time the problem is right before their eyes and brings pain and death to countless people. Living in the midst of this situation inspired me to share with you the above story.

Unfortunately, such is the situation with mediocrity in consecrated life during the twenty-first century ... it has become a pandemic. Many congregations, like ours, continue to live a normal life and are consoled by the fact that they still have large numbers (at least that is the situation with the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity). As revealed in our statistics, we are becoming more oriental and less Eurocentric and at least it seems that we have a future. But the question should be: what kind of future? Why do we want a future? Are we truly burning with the dream that the Holy Spirit inspired in Vincent de Paul four centuries ago?

As cruel as it may sound, the pandemic of mediocrity produces certain symptoms. Mediocrity begins with the false assumption that by taking perpetual vows or being ordained, the missionary has completed his formation (sometimes that formation is extended, but at most for the first five years of active ministry), after that it becomes each one fending for himself (CCD:XII:20ff.). Without realizing it, in the midst of the various concessions that are justified by all the work that is done, people develop an unconscious fear of engaging in fraternal correction and it is even viewed as inhuman to denounce the abuses and serious faults of others. This occurs perhaps because in a



community where selfishness reigns, the brain muscles tremble when previous mistakes are pointed out, mistakes, which in the best pharisaical style, are not the object of one's interest with regard to personal conversion. It is more comforting to consider the fact that *we all make mistakes* (certain), therefore, *we all have to be merciful* (certain) and *to attack our brothers* (false) *is to forget who we are* (a great fallacy).

In light of all these affirmations, one might perhaps say: *all of this sounds nice on paper!* Yes, one would have great reason to say that. One might also think: *theory says one thing, reality is quite distinct!* I must admit that perhaps, as Amedeo Cencini says, we are suffering from realism:

*Prudent individuals will say: we are dealing with problems that are bigger than us and that is referred to as "having one's feet on the ground" ... these individuals are tired of this realism that does not know how to dream and that leads to immobility and mediocrity. We find this realism very comfortable, but we also have to pay a very high price: our credibility*<sup>39</sup>.

I do not think we can find a disease that Vincent de Paul may have feared more for his various establishments than the pandemic that we are speaking about: *two or three times every day I ask God to destroy us if we are not useful for his glory* (CCD:XI:2).

Should we not give the benefit of the doubt and a certain degree of credibility to the *insolent and offensive affirmation* of the participants in the European Vocational Congress (1997) and the Latin American and Caribbean Vocation Congress

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<sup>39</sup> Amedeo, Cencini, *Abrazar el Futuro con Esperanza* [Embrace the Future with Hope], Cantabria, 2018, Kindle Edition.





(2011) who stated: *the true vocational crisis is not of those being called but of those who are calling*<sup>40</sup>.

When not properly attended, the pandemic of mediocrity will result in blood and pain and can lead to more dire consequences: the crisis of abuse<sup>41</sup>.

In reality, *the scandalous fall of a few is, generally, the result of the mediocrity of many*<sup>42</sup>, and without affirming that such is the situation in our Vincentian Congregation, we do, however, defend the need for a thorough examination. Indeed, it is there in the midst of that process that the vocational culture can become a light that enables us to live the words that we pray: *preserve in your name those whom you have called and make them truly holy*<sup>43</sup>.

### **What face do we present to the world today?**

In general, postmodern society views consecrated life with a certain “strangeness”. Chastity and total consecration to God are perhaps the most incomprehensible issues in a world characterized by the cult of pleasure and sporadic humanitarian service, where the concept of freedom views as imprisonment

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<sup>40</sup> II Latin American Continental Congress on Vocations, Final Document, #75. The same expression, but with the adverb *also* (which softens the phrase) was stated fourteen years prior in #19 of the document *New Vocations for a New Europe: the vocational crisis of those called is also a crisis of those calling*.

<sup>41</sup> To those interested in this theme, we recommend the work of Amedeo Cencini, *Ha cambiado en algo la Iglesia después de los Escándalos Sexuales? Análisis y Propuestas para la Formación* [Has anything changed in the Church after the sexual scandals? Analysis and recommendations for formation], Salamanca, 2016.

<sup>42</sup> Amedeo Cencini, *Abrazar el Futuro con Esperanza* [Embrace the Future with Hope], Cantabria, 2018, Kindle Edition.

<sup>43</sup> English translation of the *Expectatio Israel*, the words of which might vary from one place to another.



any consideration of dedicating one's life to the same task. *When our contemporaries look at our humanitarian work, we seem indispensable to them because they feel called to value the dedication and the commitment of our life on behalf of others*<sup>44</sup>.

With regard to the Congregation of the Mission, if we look in the mirror at ourselves, not only to tell us what we think about ourselves (in the best narcissistic style), but to see the face that we present to today's world, we would find a matter for reflection that deserves to be confronted from the perspective of a vocational culture.

Let us return to the congregational statistics for the year 2019 which allow us to view the number of missionaries engaged in various ministries (from highest to lowest)

**Table 5: Ministries of the CM**

| Ministries  | No. of missionaries |
|---|---------------------|
| 1. Parishes   | 1,017               |
| 2. Retired, infirm, convalescents                             | 325                 |
| 3. Seminaries and formation of clergy                         | 259                 |
| 4. Missions <i>ad Gentes</i>                                  | 187                 |
| 5. Schools (primary, secondary, university, professional)     | 165                 |
| 6. Popular Missions   | 162                 |
| 7. Administration   | 149                 |
| 8. Other  | 147                 |
| 9. Absent from the Congregation                               | 131                 |
| 10. Advanced study  | 123                 |
| 11. Chaplains (hospitals, immigrants, associations, military) | 105                 |
| 12. Daughters of Charity (directors, chaplains)               | 84                  |
| 13. Chaplains (Lay Vincentian groups)                         | 68                  |
| 14. Shrines of pilgrimage                                     | 68                  |
| 15. Direct service to the poor                                | 41                  |
| 16. On-going mission  | 33                  |
| 17. Social Communication                                      | 30                  |
| 18. Manual labor  | 28                  |

<sup>44</sup> Xavier Quinzá Lleó, *Pasión y Radicalidad, Posmodernidad y Vida Consagrada* [Passion and Radicalness. Postmodernity and Consecrated Life], Madrid, 2004, p. 55.



At first sight, we could conclude that we are a Congregation with a missionary identity that is currently committed to parish ministry. We would not, at first, point out this reality as a weakness, but it could provide us with a reason to consider some important reflections<sup>45</sup>, especially in light of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundational contract of the Congregation ... yes, this might be the time to ask ourselves: How are we seen from the outside? Is creative fidelity seen as a dimension of our Vincentian charism? Are our lives and our ministries able to attract young people?

It is striking that if we add together the number of confreres involved in ministries that we might consider as *proper* to the Little Company and in accord with the first article of our Constitutions<sup>46</sup>, we would find that adding the number of confreres involved in seminaries and formation of the clergy, missions *ad gentes*, popular missions, accompanying the Daughters of Charity, chaplains of Vincentian lay groups, direct service to the poor, and on-going missions, we would arrive at a total of 834 confreres, significantly below the 1,017 (one third of the members) currently ministering in parishes.

It is interesting to note what the Synod stated about the young people's view of the parish: *While parishes remain the primary and principal way of constituting the Church in any particular area, it was also observed that parishes struggle to appeal to young people and that their missionary vocation needs to be rethought* (Final Document of 2018 Synod, #18).

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<sup>45</sup> This reflection becomes more complex when parishes are the main or perhaps the only source of income for a province. This difficulty, however, provides all the more reason for reflection and healthy discernment.

<sup>46</sup> The first article of the Constitutions is further developed in Part Two: Life in the Congregation, Chapter 1: Apostolic Life (#10-18).







To move beyond the perspective of self-preoccupation, the primary cancer of the Church and the father of clericalism, involves listening to the voices of other people, becoming concerned about how others view us, and allowing others to challenge us so that we might find the most authentic paths that are in accord with the Vincentian missionary spirit and vocation to which we were called.

*Whenever we attempt to read the signs of the times it is helpful to listen to young people and the elderly. Both represent a source of hope for every people. The elderly bring with them memory and the wisdom of experience, which warns us not to foolishly repeat our past mistakes. Young people call us to renewed and expansive hope, for they represent new directions for humanity and open us up to the future, lest we cling to a nostalgia for structures and customs which are no longer life-giving in today's world (Evangelii Gaudium, #108).*



## **PART TWO:**

# **TOWARD A VINCENTIAN VOCATIONAL CULTURE**





Wheat and the weeds grow together and even though, according to the Master's teaching (cf. Matthew 13:24-30), it is not our task to separate them, we do have the need to distinguish them ... a difficult task without healthy discernment. Something similar occurs when we read and allow ourselves to be challenged by the realities that we have seen. That is precisely the proposed task for this second part.

What does the problem of stability reveal to us? Certainly, a challenge. We are not here to mourn the dead but to find ways to revitalize vocation at its very root ... and we do not deny that this task can cause us a certain degree of discomfort.

The proposal to create a vocational culture is not intended to provide us with various strategies that will enable us to reconstruct a questionable reality. Rather this proposal offers us a path for missionary conversion, offers us a great breadth in terms of theological criteria to assimilate the depth of our Vincentian vocation (*attitude*), and offers us a manner to awaken the senses in order to develop a *sensitivity* with regard to the more genuine aspects of our identity. Finally, this proposal offers us pedagogical methods and itineraries that can be utilized in the distinct situations in which we find ourselves. Basically, we are talking about a formation model that attempts to respond to the charismatic insight of Saint Vincent: *God is the one who calls us and who, from all eternity, has destined us to be Missionaries* (CDD:XI:98).







## Chapter III:

### A VOCATIONAL CULTURE<sup>47</sup>

From November 19 to December 1, 2018 and at the request of superior general, Father Tomaz Mavrič, CM, the First International Meeting of Directors of Vocational Ministry in the Congregation of the Mission was held at the International Formation Center in the Motherhouse in Paris.

Having had the opportunity to collaborate in developing the themes and also being a presenter at that gathering, I can state that two things are very clear:

1. In general, there is a great interest in the vocational theme among the provinces of the Congregation. The General Council encouraged organizing this event and almost all the provinces, vice-provinces and international missions sent representatives to this

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<sup>47</sup> Here we will continue to follow Amedeo Cencini, a strong advocate of a vocational culture who has made many contributions in the area of vocations, formation, theology of the priesthood and consecrated life and his specialty, psychology. We will refer to his work on numerous occasions. We also highlight here three basic documents: (1) *New Vocations for a New Europe*, 1997, which can be accessed at: [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccatheduc\\_doc\\_13021998\\_new-vocations\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_13021998_new-vocations_en.html); (2) II Latin American Congress on Vocations, 2011, which can be accessed at: <http://www.iglesiacatolica.org.uy/departamento-vocaciones-y-ministerios/files/2013/04/Doc-FINAL-II-Congreso-PV1.pdf>; (3) the position papers and presentations from the International Congress on Vocational Ministry that was held in Rome from October 19-21, 2016 with the title: *Miserando Adque Eligendo. El Cuidado Pastoral de las Vocaciones*, which can be accessed at: [www.clerus.va](http://www.clerus.va) (on this site, only three presentations are available in English, whereas all the presentations are available in Spanish).



gathering. In fact, this was one of the largest gathering of confreres at such a meeting<sup>48</sup>. This also provided us with fertile ground for reflection on this theme of vocations.

2. Second, there is a great difference in perspective with regard to vocational ministry between Westerners and people from the Orient. By this I mean that Western countries, because of the numerical decline and the advance of secularism have been forced to look anew at the vocational question. This, however, has not always been done from a prophetic vision but rather from the perspective of the harsh reality that these nations confront. As Father Elí Chaves dos Santos, CM., has stated: *although somewhat late, the theme of a culture of vocations has taken hold in the Congregation of the Mission*<sup>49</sup>.

Therefore, knowing that the theme of a vocational culture has more resonance in Europe, Latin America and North America, nevertheless if we are able to deepen our understanding of its authentic meaning and the seriousness of the ecclesial and missionary challenge that it represents, then perhaps confreres from the East will view this as a great light for its present and future reality. This is why we do not believe that this is an exclusively western reflection-proposal.

In order to simplify our understanding, we will highlight here two key concepts: the meaning of culture and a vocational

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<sup>48</sup> Seventy-five (75) missionaries involved in vocational ministry participated in this meeting.

<sup>49</sup> Eli Chaves dos Santos, CM, "Toward a Culture of Vocations in the Congregation of the Mission" in *Vincentiana* (62<sup>nd</sup> Year, July-September 2018, #3), p. 321.







culture. We also include here a very brief account of the historical approach to vocational ministry.

### **A conceptual preamble about culture**

The presenter had not finished giving the title of the paper that he was about to begin (*A Vocational Culture in Response to New Youth Settings*) when an older superior of a certain congregation suddenly rose and exclaimed: *What is happening here? How are you going to propose a single culture for all of us who are from such different countries?* Lessons learned from that experience: clarify the concepts to be sure that everyone is speaking about the same thing and do this without falling into the metaphysical vices of the philosophers from the last century<sup>50</sup>. Therefore, we are going to define what we understand by culture, aware of the fact that there may be many other legitimate interpretations.

The word *culture* has had a long journey, beginning around the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE with its Latin origin in the word *cultus* which refers to a religious act or an agricultural activity, Then, moving through the Renaissance period and later the Enlightenment, when culture became synonymous with progress and higher education, and today, when the Real Academia de la Lengua Española<sup>51</sup> (Royal Academy of the Spanish Language) gives us two meanings:

1. *A body of knowledge that allows individuals to develop their critical judgment*

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<sup>50</sup> Frege, Russell Wittgenstein, among others.

<sup>51</sup> Dictionary of the Spanish Language that can be accessed at:  
<https://www.rae.es/>



2. *A body of lifestyles and customs, knowledge and certain artistic, scientific, industrial developments during a specific era, a social group, etc.*

Although less academic, but perhaps more popular and accessible to the definition that we seek, it is interesting that when googling the word *culture*, we find mainly ethnic expressions, mostly customs, rituals, and traditions and at the same time many graffiti images and youthful graphic designs are shown ... this is an easy exercise to engage in because the internet offers much facility in such a search.

Having said that, let us conclude. We are going to use the word culture with the following understanding: *the personal involvement of subjects from a specific group who develop a lifestyle around a common project (**practical dynamism**), thanks to a series of values in which they believe and are convinced (**cognitive or attitudinal dynamism**). This process involves their whole existence (**affective or emotional dynamism**), body-mind-soul because their whole being is formed in accord with that reality.*

With this concept of culture, it is possible to understand the resistance to globalization of some indigenous peoples, whose concern has reached Pope Francis who, in turn, expressed their concern in his recent Apostolic Exhortation, *Querida Amazonia*. With this same concept, we can also understand the sad reality of young men and women who are part of the drug trafficking cartels in Latin America ... various television series highlight this situation to the point that no questions are raised about their death which results from a particular lifestyle, certain values (or anti-values from our perspective) that identify them, a sensitivity toward specific aspects of life (money and power) and an insensitivity toward other aspects (killing others becomes normal).





In this sense, our definition of culture illustrates this better because it has a system of values (*cognitive or attitudinal dynamism*), a sensitivity (*affective dynamism*) toward certain aspects of life and of course, a lifestyle (*practical dynamism or pedagogy*) which makes it easy to identify them.

### **The waiting room of vocational recruitment**

As in all ecclesial activity, vocational ministry has its origins in the person of Jesus<sup>52</sup>, and throughout the history of the Church we find men and women who were authentic vocational promoters who led others to follow Christ in various ways. Vocational concern, however, as a specific pastoral approach in the Church, occurred around the time of the Second Vatican Council and was a response to the imminent decrease in the number of priests. In this context, the decline in the number of clergy and religious made people aware of the fact that the situation had changed, and that young people were not knocking on the doors of church institutions. Therefore, it was time to go out and recruit members and so, with a shift in the interpretation of Matthew 4:18-22, people began *to fish for vocations* with the hope of being able to continue to fill the various houses of formation.

Obviously, this *fishing for vocations or recruitment approach*, which was adopted by many traditional Vincentian congregations, has become part of the list of well-intentioned mistakes that occurred immediately after the Council. In a short period of time, the effectiveness of this approach was revealed because in the postmodern era it is no longer possible to sustain pastoral approaches that are closed in upon themselves.

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<sup>52</sup> *He appointed [called] twelve so that they might be with him ...* Mark 3:14.





In other words, we are speaking about an approach in which the congregation becomes the focus of attention and the end that is pursued is the institutional good rather than the proclamation of gospel where people become the focus of attention. From the very beginning, the sentence of fruitlessness and sterility was given to this approach.

It must be said, although not without pain, that at least in the Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity, there are still individuals who want immediate responses in vocational ministry. They invest resources and much effort in developing vocational material with the childish illusion that in a short period of time, many young people will knock on their doors. Then, the faces of the superiors will light up with joy because the great hope for the future of the evangelization of the poor has arrived. Even though this is a noble intention, it is nonetheless an absurd proposition.

To view vocations in a functional manner, that is, to reduce vocational ministry to the *search for people who might be helpful for our Congregation*, is the product of an awareness that moves in accord with the rhythm of an old tune. We are referring to those who do not know how to discern, who are anxiously looking for solutions to the vocational crisis but leave aside the most important problem<sup>53</sup> and therefore end with a series of new problems that move from a mediocrity in accepting whoever knocks on the door and concludes with the problem of stability and sometimes, with the tragedy of scandal. How hard it is for us to understand the principle that *time is greater than space!*

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<sup>53</sup> *At times the urgent is postponed in favor of that which is important*, II Latin American Congress on Vocations, 2011.





In less serious cases, the price of recruitment ministry has been a disappointment, leading to the conclusion that vocations of special consecration have lost, in the new global reality, their reason for being. Therefore, *it is time for the laity*, understood not from the perspective of the role of the laity that responds to their prophetic vocation that arises from baptism (the correct perspective), but rather seeing the laity in a functional manner, something similar to that which would occur if there were a dog crisis and people had to hunt instead with cats.

There have been times when the conclusion has been more pessimistic: *No longer are there any vocations! Let us eat and drink and tomorrow we will die!*<sup>54</sup> When that occurs vocational ministry is not even an appendix on the community agendas and at the same time, life and the reason for being (vocation) has moved to a secondary position.

### **How do we understand vocational culture?**

Without any hesitation, we can state that a vocational culture is the manner in which vocation ministry is to be understood and this must be done within the framework of the New Evangelization. Yes, we want to separate ourselves from any strategy that would make us youthful and able to “catch” young people who would remain in our institutions and enable us to have sufficient personnel to carry out the process of the New Evangelization.

Rather, we would say that the New Evangelization demands a vocational culture as an end in itself and not as a means to make that process of evangelization possible. Perhaps we are

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<sup>54</sup> One of the cycles in the pandemic of mediocrity, which was previously discussed.



talking about a Copernican revolution in the vocational ministry of recruitment under the sacred principle that states: *it is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but by attraction (Evangelii Gaudium, #14)*

The concept of a vocational culture was originated by John Paul II, who on the occasion of the XXX World Day of Prayer for Vocations (1993) wrote: *I desire, first of all, to call attention to the urgency of cultivating what we could call, “basic vocational attitudes”, which give life to an authentic “culture of vocation” (John Paul II, Message for the XXX World Day of Prayer, 1993, #2)*

Even though Pope John Paul II has made a significant contribution in giving us this concept, nevertheless, the scope of a vocational culture was not yet fully developed. In fact, toward the end of his message the Pope invites us to deepen this concept:

*I turn as well to all who are called, in various ways, to define and to deepen the culture of vocation: to theologians, in order that such a culture have before all else a solid theological foundation; to those who work in the mass-media, that they may know how to enter into dialogue with young people; to educators, that they may know how to respond to the aspirations and sensitivities of the young; to spiritual directors, so that each young person might be helped to recognize that voice which calls him by name. I turn, finally, to you who are already consecrated to the Lord and, in a special way, to you priests: you have already heard and recognized the call of the*





*Good Shepherd; lend your own voice to him who today still calls many to follow him. Speak to your young people, letting them hear about the beauty of following the Lord* (John Paul II, Message for the XXX World Day of Prayer, 1993, #3)

The development of this proposal has been placed in the hands of various authors and has been the theme of reflection for various national, continental and international congresses. More recently this has been a theme of Pope Francis and the XV Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (2018). Today, we can say that our understanding of a vocational culture is the following:

*An environment that enables people to understand themselves in light of the mission that has been entrusted to them by God ... a mission to extend the Kingdom ... a vocational culture is that environment where fidelity to one's vocation is valued and defended because that vocation is a gift from God, is part of the human dignity and the creation of a new world depends on that vocation*<sup>55</sup>.

We should also note here the manner in which this concept has been developed by the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission, Tomaž Mavrič, CM, when he spoke about the need of the Vincentian Family to move in this direction:

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<sup>55</sup> Milton Tróccoli, *La Cultura Vocacional en la Iglesia Particular* [The Vocational Culture in the Local Church], presentation at the International Congress on Vocational Ministry (Rome, 2016)



*When I speak of a renewed culture of vocation to the consecrated life in general, I am very much aware that, in many parts of the world, such a culture of vocations is present. However, in other areas, society is not at all favorable to nurturing a culture of vocations to the consecrated life; it often is opposed to it, using diverse means to undermine such an environment* (Letter of September 20, 2017).

A few months later, on the occasion of the anniversary of the Foundation of the Congregation of the Mission, Father Tomaz explained the concept of a vocational culture in these words:

*The culture of vocations means an environment in which all people can discover and rediscover their reason for being on this earth, the meaning of life, the mission they are called to fulfill, the call they are invited to answer. The culture of vocations puts Jesus in the first place, no matter if it is as a layperson or a consecrated person* (Letter of January 25, 2018).

Even though we are walking on solid ground, nevertheless we must continue to deepen our understanding of this matter.

### **Vocational culture and the New Evangelization**

Probably most members of the Congregation of the Mission are more familiar with the theme of the New Evangelization than the concept of a vocational culture. That is to be expected since evangelization is at the heart of our charism and we are







challenged to engage in this process at the present time ... and to do so from the perspective of creative fidelity to the experience that the Holy Spirit inspired in Vincent de Paul in 1617.

In fact, the New Evangelization was a dominant theme during the 2016 General Assembly and is reflected in the commitments of each of the Conferences of Visitors. The General Assembly stated: *As members of the Assembly, we confirmed our fidelity to the Vincentian Charism that we have inherited from Saint Vincent de Paul and we committed ourselves to respond to the call of the New Evangelization*<sup>56</sup>.

In order to clarify concepts, let us read anew *Evangelii Gaudium* where the Pope explains the New Evangelization from the perspective of three areas which are composed of all those who have been called together:

*The New Evangelization is a summons addressed to all and is carried out in three principal settings. In the first place (Group 1) we mention the area of ordinary pastoral ministry ... which seeks to help believers to grow spiritually so that they can respond to God's love ever more fully in their lives.*

*A second area (Group 2) is that of "the baptized whose lives do not reflect the demands of Baptism ..."*

*Lastly, (Group 3) we cannot forget that evangelization is first and foremost about preaching the Gospel to those who do not know*

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<sup>56</sup> "Final Document: XLII General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission" in *Vincentiana* (60<sup>th</sup> Year, July-September 2016, #3), p. 417. In the same line of thinking, the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the 2022 General Assembly is based on the evangelizing call of *Evangelii Gaudium* which is to be read from the perspective of our Vincentian identity.

*Jesus Christ or who have always rejected him. Many of them are quietly seeking God, led by a yearning to see his face, even in countries of ancient Christian tradition. All of them have a right to receive the Gospel. Christians have the duty to proclaim the Gospel without excluding anyone (Evangelii Gaudium, #14),*

Where does a vocational culture enter into this proposal with regard to the New Evangelization? Are we manipulating theology in order to accommodate it to our liking?

More than twenty years ago, the European Congress on vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life, presented a clarifying demand:

*The New Evangelization must proclaim again the strong sense of life as “vocation” in its fundamental call to holiness, recreating a culture favorable to different vocations and ready to promote a real increase in quality in vocations ministry (New Vocations for a New Europe, #9).*

In the traditional mentality of vocational *fishing*, the *fisher* is reduced to those weighty, mature *fish* that are of interest, those that appear capable and have an ability to respond to the call to a vocation of special consecration. On the other hand, with regard to the beneficiaries, the *gospel of vocation* (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, #34) is proclaimed to all who are part of the ordinary life of the Church, those who have distanced themselves from the Church or who no longer believe, including those who are being offered the first proclamation of the Risen Christ.

Far from a utilitarian or numerical vision of vocational ministry, the heart of the New Evangelization and the task of a vocational culture is threefold:

**1. In the area of ordinary pastoral ministry (group**

**1):** *A vocational culture offers a vocational horizon that is delineated and actualized from the perspective of a New Evangelization which attempts to overcome repetitive dynamics that are often ineffective<sup>57</sup>.*

It is here where Christians hear the proclamation *of salvation that is an absolutely unmerited and totally free gift and makes those saved, agents of salvation<sup>58</sup>*. This means that the proclamation is in accord with *the very dignity of the individual who has been freed (that is, saved) and is responsible for the salvation of others (able to take charge of the redemption of another)<sup>59</sup>*. In synthesis, in ordinary pastoral ministry, the vocational culture leads people to take the step to that place in which all those who have been called, become callers.

In other words, we are speaking about *giving a vocational culture to every form of pastoral ministry, so that the homily, the administration of the sacraments, the celebration of the eucharist, the ministry of lector, catechesis, devotional exercises ... if*

<sup>57</sup> Amedeo Cencini, *Nuevas Realidades en Materia Vocacional* [New Realities in Vocational Matters], presentation at the International Congress on Vocational Ministry (Rome, 2016)

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*



*these are not vocational, then they cannot be considered Christian*<sup>60</sup>.

**2. In the area of baptized persons whose lives do not reflect the demands of Baptism (group 2):** A vocational culture makes it clear to us that today vocations of special consecration are less and less coming about in a traditional manner (young people who have grown up in a home where the faith was taught to them, who have been altar servers in their parish or who have had constant contact with men/women religious and have a desire to be like them). This manner of being attracted to a vocation is becoming extinct and is being substituted with new situations: young converts who, at a more adult stage in their life, have been challenged by the proclamation of Jesus Christ<sup>61</sup> or who come from less traditional situations and as a result demand, in the language of Pope Francis, *a church that goes forth* (*Evangelii Gaudium*, #20). In our case, these young converts exhort us to become *a Congregation that goes forth, a Vincentian Family that goes forth*. This going forth is to be understood as a demand of the New Evangelization. Thus, *the hunt* or *the fishing* for vocations becomes meaningless and is replaced by the task to proclaim the gospel of vocation.

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Here we have the phenomenon of late vocations, seen especially in Europe and North America, and now more frequently seen in Latin America. In these cases, one must be rigorous in examining the candidate's motivation, while at the same time accompanying these individuals. Later, we will speak more about this.





**3. In the area of those who do not know Jesus Christ or who have always rejected him (Group 3):** today, the vocational culture offers us the possibility of proposing a *vocational kerygma*, a concept that might seem strange to those who have a limited vision of this dynamic concept that integrates the whole process of evangelization as well as to those who insist on a narrow concept of vocation. Here we are invited to broaden our theological understanding:

*The vocational proposal can, and perhaps, ought to be part of the first proclamation and as we previously pointed out, a part of the activity that gives evidence of the call and of the co-responsibility of the creature in the plan of salvation. Vocation is not something that comes “after”, as if we were dealing with some point of arrival that is accessible to only a few or that some virtuous individuals have achieved. Christianity is essentially and immediately vocation, a call, solidarity with sinful men and women who are in need of salvation, an inspiration to become an active part of the mystery of redemption. Thus, Christianity cannot be authentically understood apart from a consideration of this vocational calling. Apart from the discovery of their proper vocation, believers cannot give full consent to their faith. In summary, vocation is that which allows the faith to be born and to grow because being a Christian supposes that one has been called and sent forth, has been*





*saved in order to become involved in the task of saving others*<sup>62</sup>.

As expected, this approach will meet with resistance, especially from those who fear that a vocational culture of such depth will ultimately become youth ministry rather than vocational ministry. There are those who would see that such an approach runs the risk of dissolving vocations of special consecration (such as vocations to the Congregation of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity and other Vincentian institutes of consecrated life) into a liquid vocation in which all vocations appear to be simply personal options without any distinction.

With all humility we have to admit that some pastoral attempts to create a vocational culture, especially in Latin America with theologies inspired in *class struggle*, have given a foundation to the above-mentioned criticisms. Even though we have been moving along this path for two decades, we still need to put aside our prejudices in order to understand the inconsistencies of that era, especially with regard to an early and accelerated interpretation of a vocational culture, which, although it was opposed to the practice of recruitment, nevertheless, made the same mistake and ended in individuals turning in upon themselves. In the case of recruitment, diocesan or congregational structures were the focal point and in the case of failed attempts to create a vocational culture, there was a greater concern to attack proselytizing strategies than to offer a response that convoked and challenged individuals to follow Jesus Christ the redeemer ... in our case, to follow Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor.

<sup>62</sup> Amedeo Cencini, *Nuevas Realidades en Materia Vocacional*, [New Realities in Vocational Matters], presentation at the International Congress on Vocational Ministry (Rome, 2016).





On the other hand, our task is to proclaim, in season and out of season, the gospel of vocation, that is, the good news of the Risen Christ who invites us to be part of his saving plan because we are the fruit of love and have been called to a passionate life that overcomes the meaninglessness of materialism, self-indulgence and hedonism.

In itself, this great news deserves to be communicated and produce fruit in fertile land: *an appropriate soil, good earth, a fertile vocational culture (considered from three dimensions: attitude, sensitivity and praxis) ... that is where vocations of special consecration and to the priesthood and religious life can easily flourish*<sup>63</sup>.

Thus, a vocational culture is at the heart of the New Evangelization and the stronger the heart beats, the more powerful is the proclamation of salvation to the poor and as a consequence, more workers will respond to the call.

### Dimensions of the vocational culture

We have stated that culture is *the personal involvement of subjects from a specific group who develop a lifestyle around a common project (**practical dynamism**), thanks to a series of values in which they believe and are convinced (**cognitive or attitudinal dynamism**). This process involves their whole existence (**affective or emotional dynamism**), body-mind-soul because their whole being is formed in accord with that reality.*

Reflecting on the dimensions of this definition, we can come to a clearer understanding of a vocational culture by utilizing the “little method” of Vincent de Paul (CCD:XI:237-

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*





260): *nature* refers to the concept that explains the being or attitude that grounds a vocational culture; the *purpose* that we seek is found in the affective dynamism that provides reasons for a specific vocation, that is, an awareness and therefore, it is through the *means* that we achieve a methodological dynamism that leads to a vocational culture. These means can be viewed as a pedagogy.

In this way nature, purpose and means make it easier for us to adapt to a vocational culture.

### **1. Nature of a vocational culture: attitude**

When we speak about an attitude, we refer to principles and convictions that ground a system of values upon which a culture is built up.

A good example of this is freedom as viewed in the Western world ... this is greatly valued in the postmodern society and has deep Christian roots. On this principle of freedom, a whole awareness is created so that people have an almost unconscious respect for that value. Laws are enacted to guard that principle and a social lifestyle is created, that is, a praxis that is clearly rooted in the conviction of freedom. As a principle, freedom has become the subject matter of paintings, theatrical works, novels and so many other forms of artistic expression.

In the case of a vocational culture, a vocational attitude becomes a theology upon which that culture is grounded. We ought to recognize that, for proselytizing reasons that are recurrent with regard to vocational ministry, people often have a more practical concept of a vocational culture, one that has little theological content. In my experience of providing formation in this area, the expectations are often lowered, and





the speaker is expected to offer some methodological insights to those involved in this ministry.

Yet, in reality, to speak about a theology of vocation is to invoke one of the most sublime aspects of theological reflection. Such a theology allows us to enter into the dynamism of God, the eternal caller, who revealed his merciful face to us in his Son, Jesus Christ, through the activity of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, vocation, in itself, is a revelation of the love of God who has created us and who has called us to share in his saving plan, thus making us participants as disciples-missionaries. As participants in this plan, we have become a living part of the assembly of those who have been called together (*ekklēsia*), and now, it has become necessary for each member of that assembly to enter into dialogue about their freedom as creatures and the freedom of the Creator, and thus find their specific place or vocation within this wonderful plan<sup>64</sup>. The theology of vocation proclaims to us the great beauty so desired in the heart of the human person, the gospel of vocation.

*In this sense, vocation can be considered the high point of an authentic theology that involves human reflection on God as Creator and Redeemer. It is an indicator of the extent to which God has made the human person similar to himself, that is, made men and women agents of salvation, capable of saving ... of course, saving through grace*<sup>65</sup>.

<sup>64</sup> These words are an attempt to synthesize #54-69 of the II International Congress of Vocational Ministry that was held in Costa Rica (2011).

<sup>65</sup> Amedeo Cencini, *Nuevas Realidades en Materia Vocacional* [New Realities in Vocational Matters], presentation at the International Congress on Vocational Ministry (Rome, 2016).



## 2. Purpose of a vocational culture: sensitivity

Sensitivity is a movement from objective principles and values (*such is how things should be*) to a subjective value (*such is how I feel*) with regard to these convictions. It means that individuals experience and feel the goodness and beauty of the object in question and experience and feel this in such a way that they begin to make fulfillment, freedom, and personal and community happiness more visible.

In terms of vocational culture, we have Amedeo Cencini's extensive work, which includes a trilogy of publications<sup>66</sup> and numerous presentations, and it is difficult to synthesize all this material. Nevertheless, the same author, without knowing it, has provided us with the summary that we require. During the First Meeting of Vocation Directors of the Congregation of the Mission that was held at the International Formation Center in Paris (2018), he stated:

*Desire, and the ability to desire, is part of a person's general sensitivity; that is, of that very rich inner world (of energy) that orients it in one direction or another. This orientation is made up of senses (external and internal), sensations, emotions, feelings, affections, desires, tastes, choice criteria (ethical-moral), thoughts, passions, etc. It is precisely the sensitivity that makes us "feel" something or behavior or relationships as good or beautiful,*

<sup>66</sup> We recommend to the reader the following three books written by Amedeo Cencini: *Que Hemos Perdido los Sentidos? En Busca de Sensibilidad Creyente*, Santander, 2014; *Dall' Aurora Io Ti Cerco. Evangelizzare la sensibilità per imparare a discernere*. Milan, 2018; *I Passi del Discernere... "Chiamati a formare le coscienze, non a pretendere di sostituirle"*. Milano, 2019.



*as true or not, as moral or not, or that determines in us likes or dislikes, attractions and decisions, giving us the strength to carry them out. Sensitivity is born immediately, starting from the first relationships with significant figures, but then it is determined increasingly by our personal choices ... In fact, relational, moral, intellectual, aesthetic, believing, spiritual, praying, theological, etc. sensitivity exists. There is also vocational sensitivity<sup>67</sup>.*

Thus, sensitive individuals are those *who see the world in color as opposed to those who see everything in black and white*<sup>68</sup>. Therefore, a vocational ministry that develops a few theological principles and immediately moves into action is doomed to failure. A vocational culture cannot be created in a situation where people's minds and feelings are not awakened, where consecration and commitment are viewed as undertakings that must be fulfilled rather than passions that allow individuals to live their proper vocation in an intense manner and thus, become filled with joy as others become awakened to that same sensitivity.

Sensitivity allows convictions that have crystallized in the mind to move to the heart in order that *the will might follow the light of understanding and be led to do what is suggested to it as good and desirable* (CCD:XI:360). In this way, those senses that postmodernity had anesthetized are once again awakened and vocation becomes something that is desired and

<sup>67</sup> Amedeo Cencini, fdcc, "Crafting a Vocational Culture Today" in *Vincentiana* (65<sup>th</sup> Year, January-March 2019, #1), p. 88.

<sup>68</sup> Stefano Guarinelli, *El Sacerdote Inmaduro. Un Itinerario Espiritual*, [The Immature Priest: A Spiritual Journey], Salamanca, 2014, p. 30.



sought by those who have been evangelized with regard to this sensitivity<sup>69</sup>.

This is why joy, an evangelizing dimension that has been proclaimed by Pope Francis, has captivated young people more than any other proposal or perfectly planned pastoral strategies that have been unable to touch the sensitivity of people.

### **3. Means to establish a vocational culture: pedagogy**

Praxis or pedagogy *refers to concrete action in which mentality and sensitivity become attitudes that begin to form a tradition that encompasses a fundamental value, a value that is expressed in gestures and the lifestyle of each individual and of the whole community*<sup>70</sup>.

Two clear examples of vocational pedagogy are: Saint Vincent de Paul and Pope Francis. We will speak about Vincent de Paul in the following chapter, but here we focus on Pope Francis' gestures and words:

*Vocational pastoral ministry is learning the style of Jesus, who passes through the places of daily life, stops without being hurried and, by looking at our brothers [and sisters] with mercy, leads them to encounter God the Father* (Address of Pope Francis to Participants in the International Conference on Pastoral Work for Vocations, October 21, 2016).

<sup>69</sup> Stefano Guarinelli, *El Sacerdote Inmaduro. Un Itinerario Espiritual*, [The Immature Priest: A Spiritual Journey], Salamanca, 2014, p. 30.

<sup>70</sup> Rolando Gutiérrez, CM, "Toward a Vincentian Culture of Vocations" in *Vincentiana* (62nd Year, July-September 2018, #3), p. 337.





In the same discourse, Pope Francis shared with the participants a vocational pedagogy based on Jesus' ministry which he summarized with three verbs:

### **[3.1.] To go out**

*Vocational pastoral ministry needs a Church in motion, able to expand her borders, measuring them not on the narrow-mindedness of human calculations nor the fear of making mistakes, but on the broad measure of the merciful heart of God. There cannot be a fruitful sowing of vocations if we simply remain closed within the “convenient pastoral criterion of ‘we have always done it this way’”, without “being bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and method of evangelization in our respective communities” (Evangelii Gaudium #33). We have to learn to go out from our rigidity that makes us incapable of communicating the joy of the Gospel, out from the standardized formulas that often prove to be anachronistic, out from the preconceived analyses that classify the lives of people into cold categories. Go out from all of this (Address of Pope Francis to Participants in the International Conference on Pastoral Work for Vocation, October 21, 2016).*

### **[3.2.] To see**

*When he goes into the streets, Jesus stops and meets the gaze of the other, without haste. This is what makes his call attractive and*





*fascinating. Unfortunately, today haste and the speed of the stimuli to which we are subjected often do not leave space for that interior silence in which the Lord's call echoes. At times it is also possible to run this risk in our communities: pastors and pastoral workers who are hurried, overly preoccupied with things to do, who risk falling into an empty organizational activism, without being able to stop to meet people. The Gospel, however, shows us that vocation starts with a look of mercy that settled upon me* (Address of Pope Francis to Participants in the International Conference on Pastoral Work for Vocation, October 21, 2016).

### **[3.3.] To call**

*This is the typical verb of the Christian vocation. Jesus does not make long speeches, he does not provide a programme to adhere to, he does not proselytize, nor does he offer prepackaged answers. In speaking to Matthew, he merely says: "Follow me!". In this way, he stirs in Matthew the appeal of discovering a new destination, opening his life towards a "place" that goes beyond the little desk where he is seated* (Address of Pope Francis to Participants in the International Conference on Pastoral Work for Vocation, October 21, 2016).





## **Chapter IV:**

### **A VOCATIONAL CULTURE AND THE VINCENTIAN CHARISM**

We could say much about the ministry of Vincent de Paul: creator of the Confraternities of Charity, founder and superior general of the Congregation of the Mission, cofounder and superior of the Daughters of Charity, chaplain of the French galley slaves, director of the Visitation Sisters in Paris, director of the Ladies at the Hôtel-Dieu, president of the Tuesday Conferences, reformer of the clergy, member of the Council of Conscience at the Royal Court ... and we could still add other titles. Yet, more specifically, the vocation of Vincent de Paul was to follow Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor and it is from that perspective that all his other services and ministers should be viewed.

More than four centuries later, that same vocation continues to inspire millions of people who are members of the various branches of the worldwide Vincentian Family, members of the three branches that were established by Vincent as well as those persons who through the charism of charity and mission follow the call of Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor.

For the purpose of this study, we have emphasized the vocation of special consecration that belongs to the Vincentian charism, and on various occasions, we direct our attention more specifically to the members of the Congregation of the Mission. Given the fact that our theme has, only recently, become a topic of discussion and reflection for the larger Vincentian Family, it becomes necessary to begin from the





inside, from the various institutions that have been established, in order to move in a more consistent manner to those places where vocational seeds are planted. Yes, in terms of a vocational culture, we have to continue that journey and here I refer to all those who seek to *clothe themselves in the spirit of Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor*: lay men and women, consecrated men and women, missionaries, sisters ... all who have been called by the same Lord, who has eternally destined us to be part of the dream that began in 1617.

### **Vocational concepts in Vincent de Paul (attitude)<sup>71</sup>**

Vincent de Paul was never concerned about the numerical growth of the Congregation. We know that Vincent viewed the Congregation as the *little company* and that at the time of the foundational contract there were two members: Vincent and M. Portail (CCD:XIIIA:213-217). Later, in 1626, the Act of Association of the First Missionaries was signed<sup>72</sup>. The Congregation at first recorded a slow growth, about six individuals entered the Congregation each year. This criterion was stated again in 1635 when Vincent wrote to M. Portail in Cevennes:

*The Company is getting along fine, thank God  
... Since your departure, six people have  
joined us. Oh how I fear large numbers and  
expansion (CCD:I:304).*

<sup>71</sup> This section is based on the article: Rolando Gutiérrez, CM, "Toward a Vincentian Culture of Vocations" in *Vincentiana* (62<sup>nd</sup> Year, July-September 2018, #3), p. 325-343.

<sup>72</sup> This document was first signed François du Coudray (a priest from the Diocese of Amiens) and Jean DeLaSalle and later was signed by J. Bécu, A. Lucas, J. Brunet and J. Dehorsgny; cf. CCD:XIIIA:222-223.







After 1637, the average increased to twenty-three individuals each year. At the time of Vincent's death (1660), there were 614 members: 189 brothers and 425 priests ... the number of those who persevered in their vocation, however, was about 200. A great increase in numbers occurred during the time when Edme Jolly was superior general (1673-1697): during a period of twenty-four years, 1062 new members entered the Congregation<sup>73</sup>.

The real contribution of Vincent de Paul and of the Vincentian tradition, which still provides insight with regard to vocation ministry, is found in two primary elements: pastoral guidelines with regard to vocational ministry and the development of a theology of vocations which gradually led to the concept of "suitability" as outlined in the present Code of Canon Law<sup>74</sup>.

## 1. Vocational institutions of Vincent de Paul

It is easy to recognize Vincent's principle, namely, *never to urge anyone to embrace our state* (CCD:VIII:342). Throughout his life Vincent never wavered from that basic foundation:

*It is for God alone to choose those whom he wishes to call to it, and we are sure that one Missionary given by his fatherly hand will do more good by himself than many others who*

<sup>73</sup> L. Mezzadri, CM and José María Roman, CM, *The Vincentians: A General History of the Congregation of the Mission; volume 1: From the Foundation to the End of the Seventeenth Century, 1625-1697*; translated by Robert Cummings, edited by Joseph E. Dunne and John E. Rybolt, CM, New City Press, Hyde Park, 2009, p. 97-98, 316-323.

<sup>74</sup> Canons #1024-1052.

*would not have a true vocation. It is up to us to ask him to send good workers into his harvest and to live so well that we will give them, by our example, an attraction rather than a distaste for working with us (CCD:VIII:342).*

Thus, we find ourselves before the two primary elements in Vincent's concept of vocational ministry: prayer and witness.

With regard to prayer for vocations, it should be stated here that Vincent at first felt that nothing should be done to attract vocations and then felt that it was necessary to pray for vocations under the patronage of Saint Joseph:

*I thank God for the special devotions you are planning in order to ask God, through the intercession of blessed Saint Joseph, for the spread of the Company. I ask his divine goodness to accept them. For more than twenty years I have not dared to ask this of God, thinking that, since the Congregation is his work, its preservation and growth should be left to his providence alone. Reflecting, however, on the recommendation given us in the Gospel to ask him to send laborers into his harvest, I have become convinced of the importance and usefulness of this devotion (CCD:V:468-469).*

This devout tradition has been preserved among us in the prayer, *Expectatio Israel*, which has been mistakenly attributed to Father Fiat<sup>75</sup>. According to Father John Rybolt, this prayer

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<sup>75</sup> Antoine Fiat was superior general from 1878 to 1914, the longest period of time in the history of the Congregation.

was most probably composed by Pierre LeGo who lived between 1767-1847<sup>76</sup>.

With regard to witness, Vincent understood this in two ways. First, a daily fraternal sense of being members of an authentic community which was expressed in the *Common Rules* that were distributed to the members of the Little Company two years before Vincent died:

*Love, like that between brothers, should always be present among us, as well as the bond of holiness and these should be safeguarded in every possible way. For this reason there should be great mutual respect, and we should get along as good friends, always living in Community (Common Rules, VIII:2)*

In this manner, Vincent was confident that the members would enjoy credibility with the poor men and women whom they served and there would be an increase in the number of vocations, the fruit that would arise from this community mysticism:

*O Divine Goodness, unite in this way all hearts in the Little Company of the Mission, then order whatever you please. Labor will be sweet to them and every task easy; the strong person will relieve the weak one, and the weak will cherish the strong and obtain increased*

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<sup>76</sup> Father Fiat made the prayer, *Expectatio Israel*, obligatory in the Motherhouse and promoted this prayer as part of his concern with regard to the increase in vocations. It was the General Assembly of 1919 that decided to make this prayer obligatory for all the houses of the Congregation; cf. John Rybolt, CM, *The Vincentians: A General History of the Congregation of the Mission, 5. An Era of Expansion (1878-1919)*, edited by Miranda Lukatch, New City Press, Hyde Park, New York, 2014, p. 54-55.



*strength for him from God. And so, Lord, your work will be done as you would like, for the building up of your Church, and your workers will multiply, attracted by the perfume of such charity (CCD:III:258).*

The other side of the witness coin is the radicalness with which we live the virtue of zeal for the salvation of souls, which gives meaning to our missionary vocation.

*Saint Vincent pointed this out when he warned the Missionaries that they had to commit themselves to the ministries that Divine Providence had given them at the time of their origin. If the community ceased to be an apostolic point of reference, a place where one was able to discern the call of God, then her ministry on behalf of vocations would be distorted and would have no impact. The contrast between what was written in the foundational document and the manner in which the confreres were actually living their lives could discourage possible candidates who wish to enter the Congregation.<sup>77</sup>*

## **2. The principle of suitability in Saint Vincent**

Vincent's vocational theory was influenced by the Jesuit concept of *discernment*, which was framed by the seventeenth century French school of spirituality and therefore, referred to a theology of priesthood.

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<sup>77</sup> Antonio Orcajo, CM, *Espiritualidad Vicentina: Pastoral Vocacional* [Vincentian Spirituality: Vocational Ministry], published in 1995; see: <http://vincentians.com/es/espiritualidad-vicenciana-pastoral-vocacional/>



*So, one must be called by God to this holy profession. This can be seen in O[ur] L[ord] Himself, who was the Eternal Priest and who, nevertheless, did not will to assume the exercise of this state until after this testimony of the Eternal Father who said, "This is my beloved Son, listen to Him." This example, together with my experience of the disorders produced by priests who have not made the effort to live according to the holiness of their specific character, causes me to advise those who ask my opinion about receiving it, not to do so unless they have a genuine call from God and a pure intention of honoring O[ur] L[ord] by the practice of his virtues and the other sure signs that his divine goodness is calling them to it. I feel so strongly about this that, if I was not already a priest, I never would become one. I often say this to such applicants, and I have said it more than a hundred times when preaching to the country folk (CCD:VII:479-480).*

The fruit of this idea was revealed in Vincent's care in examining the motives and the abilities of the candidates who desired to be missionaries<sup>78</sup>. For example, in order to enter the Congregation, Vincent requested that individuals *have good health, intelligence and the right intention, although they may have no extraordinary gifts or even no talent for preaching* (CCD:VII:251).

<sup>78</sup> The criteria that were used by Vincent when deciding upon the entrance of candidates into the Congregation are further developed in the following article: Corpus Juan Delgado Rubio, "Commentaries on the *Ratio Formationis*: Preamble and Chapter 1" in *Vincentiana* (59<sup>th</sup> Year, April-June 2015, #2) p. 203-212.



When the superior at Sedan, Marc Coglée, spoke about a nephew who wanted to enter the Congregation, Vincent demanded that he be clear about the implications involved in taking on the life of a missionary:

*If his nephew wants to enter our Congregation, he must be told all the difficulties to be found in it, the obedience he must practice, the detachment he must have, and the suffering to be endured. If his mind is really made up, let me know his character traits and the state of his health (CCD:IV:266).*

In 1657, Vincent wrote to Guillaume Delville, who frequently sent candidates to the Congregation and demanded that he have more knowledge about the individuals whom he was presenting for admittance ... he should be more concerned about the motivation of these persons than the numerical growth of the Company:

*We put the tall young tailor, whom you sent us to be a Brother, in the sewing room to give him a try at that, but he does not know how –and does not want– to work so he is looking for a job in the city; I had him given an ecu so he could leave. We will also be obliged to dismiss M. Desfodtq, who is negligent in the seminary exercises and does not seem very capable for the Company. Monsieur, please do not send us anyone else unless you know him well and see some signs of a vocation in him (CCD:VI:588).*

About the expression, *does not seem very capable for the Company* ... Coste, in a footnote at the bottom of the page states: *The original has “does not seem very capable suitable*





*for the Company.*” The saint himself wrote “capable” but forgot to cross out “suitable” (CCD:VI:588, footnote #2).

Rightly, in the concept of *suitability* (even if the word was not coined by Vincent) we find one of Vincent’s great contributions with regard to the reform of the clergy. It is this concept which grounds the vocation that is proper to the Congregation and made Vincent a pioneer with regard to suitability for ecclesial ministry. For example, between 1643 and 1652 Vincent was a member of the Council of Conscience at the Royal Court and it was there that he was engaged in the struggle to make *suitability a fundamental criterion for episcopal appointments*.

### ***Where God wants us: The feel for a Vincentian vocational culture***

We have recounted some of Vincent’s vocational convictions, what we could call a *Vincentian vocational mindset*, but the deepest well that could refresh the vocational sources of the Vincentian Family is found in Vincent’s sensitivity to the will of God, which was the foundation of his own vocation and therefore, should also be the foundation of our vocation. We will refer to this as the *Vincentian vocational sensitivity*.

Many biographies have been written about the life of Vincent de Paul, some of which have been controversial. Among the biographers, we have those (beginning with Abelly<sup>79</sup>) who attempted to see a saint from the time of his

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<sup>79</sup> Louis Abelly, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul: Founder and First Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission*, 3 volumes, edited by John E. Rybolt, CM, translated by William Quinn, FSC, notes by Edward R. Udovic, CM and John E. Rybolt, CM, introduction by Stafford Poole, CM, New City Press, New Rochelle, New York, 1993.



almost “immaculate childhood”. We also have those (such as Redier<sup>80</sup>) who have attempted to discover a process of conversion that began in the year 1617. Here, however, we take a more balanced approach<sup>81</sup> and affirm that Vincent’s *discernment of the will of God* is an aspect that did not suddenly appear after 1617, but had been present, in its own way, during the time of Vincent’s youthful search for an ecclesiastical benefice and an *honorable retirement* (CCD:I:15). At the age of twenty-nine, when he had not yet heard the call to serve the poor, Vincent never turned his back on the need to discern the will of God.

From this perspective, we do not canonize the activities of Vincent’s youth, nevertheless, without exaggerating or minimizing his conversion process, we affirm that Vincent de Paul was *sensitive* to the signs of God’s will with regard to his life. Therefore, after years of searching between failures and successes, after suffering captivity, the slander of being a thief and the temptation against the faith and especially, after having come in contact with Pierre de Bérulle, Saint Francis de Sales and André Duval and after *feeling* with his hands the misery of men and women who had been abandoned, Vincent developed a *sensitivity* that led him to respond with the complete freedom of a created individual to the freedom of the Creator *who from all eternity had destined him to be a missionary* (CCD:XI:98).

<sup>80</sup> Antoine Redier, *La Vraie Vie de Saint Vincent de Paul*. Paris, 1927.

<sup>81</sup> We rely on the following three sources: Marie-Joëlle Guillaume, *Vincent de Paul. Un saint au Gran Siècle*, Paris, 2015; Luigi Mezzadri, CM, *Vincenzo De’ Paoli. Vita, Carisma e Carità*, Rome, 2019; José María Román, *St. Vincent de Paul: A Biography*, translated by Sr. Joyce Howard, DC, Melisende, London, 1999.



It may seem strange to speak about the *sensitivity* of this seventeenth century man from the Gascon area of France, especially in light of his strong character and his formation in the rural countryside. From an affective-existential perspective of a vocational culture, if Vincent had not developed the *attitudes* that we previously spoke about and the *sensitivity* that led to the creation of a pedagogy, then, the charity-mission endeavor would have died with him.

Thus, for example, when motivating his confreres to strive at acquiring virtue and when speaking about their relationship with the *ordinandi* at Saint-Lazare, Vincent stated: *God will see that your very presence will bring light to their understanding and warmth to their wills to make them better men* (CCD:XII:16). Formed in the scholastic anthropology proper to his era, it is not surprising that his formation proposal should be directed to the understanding (*mentality*) and to the will (*sensitivity*).

In a very clear manner, Vincent condemned *insensitivity* regarding the affairs of God and the neighbor as the capital sin of the missionary:

*Fifth: the last enemy is insensitivity regarding the affairs of God and of our neighbor. This vice causes the insensitive man to feel no love or attraction for what concerns his salvation. That is why Saint Bernard considers this passion a sign of reprobation. We certainly go to church to pray, sing, say Mass, and perform the other liturgical functions, but all these functions are performed without feeling, tastelessly, and without devotion. What is the cause of this callousness? (CCD:XII:260).*



The vocational sensitivity of Vincent responded, above all, to the principle which condemns the temptation *to seek oneself* (CCD:XII:260)<sup>82</sup> and which demands that one live in accord *with the evangelical maxims*, and as a result, *every effort must be made to clothe oneself in the spirit of Jesus Christ* (CCD:XII:83-84).

According to Pierre Deffrennes, that principle is in accord *with the practice of seeking the will of God in all things*:

*The practice of the will of God is nothing but the application of a simple idea, perhaps too simple. If we were to make this practice a philosophy, the result would be a blind and crude voluntarism. Vincent, however, did not become involved in philosophy, but was concerned with the lofty doctrine of the spirit of God. We do not say that in this way Vincent was able to develop a more flexible spirituality. Nevertheless, the simplicity of this practice, which is the enemy of nuances and self-absorption, seemed apt for Vincent's robust nature and enabled him to deepen his relationship with God. Thanks to his powerful realism, Vincent seemed to have found in this practice both a mystical consolation and a stimulus for action. Vincent's sensitivity enabled him to accommodate himself to this*

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<sup>82</sup> *Isn't it true that we seek self without even thinking about it? We flatter ourselves and do not oppose nature, which has no other aim than its own satisfaction* (CCD:XII:260).





*practice ... furthermore, it seems that he was able to heighten his sensitivity*<sup>83</sup>.

Vincent's sensitivity was oriented toward the will of God, that is, his vocation was sustained from that perspective. For Vincent, the will of God is *following Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor* and from that conviction-sensitivity each of Vincent's works were developed. All of this can be applied to the call of all those who shared in Vincent's charism. This is fundamental to the hermeneutics of a Vincentian vocational culture, which our Founder developed in his conference "Perseverance in Vocation" (October 29, 1638) and which inspired the writing of this book.

*God is the one who calls us and who, from all eternity, has destined us to be Missioners, since he did not bring us to birth either one hundred years earlier or later but precisely at the time of the institution of this Company. Consequently, we must neither seek nor expect rest, satisfaction, and blessings anywhere else but in the [Congregation of the] Mission, since that is the only place God wants and desires us to be ... presuming, of course, that our vocation is genuine and not founded on self-interest, or to free ourselves from the inconveniences of life, or from any other motive of human respect (CCD:XI:98).*

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<sup>83</sup> Pierre Deffrennes, *La Vocación de San Vicente de Paul. Estudio de Psicología Sobrenatural* [The Vocation of Vincent de Paul: A Psychological Supernatural Study], Salamanca, 2008, p. 114-115. This article was originally published in 1932 in the journal, *Revue d'Ascétique et de Mystique*.





The fundamental principle of the Vincentian vocation is summarized in a few words: *the primacy of God's will*. We would dare to say that the best vocational strategies and the task of those responsible for accompanying individuals discerning a vocation either has this principle as the foundation of everything or else they are moving in the opposite direction with regard to our reason for existence: *it is God who has called us*.

With those words, *it is God who has called us*, Vincent expressed God's initiative with regard to the vocation of each Missionary, each Daughter of Charity and each person who joins the ranks of the ministry of charity-mission. The *eternal caller* has convoked us and has a monopoly on *calling* ... and doing so *according to his will* and at every moment in history.

It is from this perspective that a rigorous examination of the motives of those interested in becoming members of the Congregation finds its meaning. This same perspective also highlights the struggle with regard to suitability in reforming the clergy and any proselytizing attempt to reduce vocational ministry to recruitment loses its value. Our challenge is to discern the signs of God's will as the root of our vocation.

Vincent's perspective with regard to the will of God is not abstract. Rather, God has destined us to be missionaries in the here and now moment of history. This means that those called commit their whole life (all they are and all they have) moving from the objective reality, that is, the divine initiative to the subjective reality, human sensitivity. Therefore, *we must neither seek nor expect rest, satisfaction and blessings anywhere else but in the Congregation of the Mission (CCD:XI:98)*.



Again, we stated that Vincent's perspective should not be reduced to a theoretical statement that then moves into practical recommendations. Rather, this perspective is intended to encompass the whole person to such a degree that those who have been called to follow Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor, no longer distinguish between their happiness and their missionary service. Rather they find a total harmony between their personal time<sup>84</sup> and their evangelizing ministry on behalf of those who are poor. Finally, the very fiber of their being has been infused with the same missionary spirit that inspired Vincent de Paul and his immediate companions.

We could be standing in front of the philosopher's stone of the Vincentian Vocational Culture. This may also be the perspective that many initial and life-long formation processes have not achieved and that has led to the problem of stability that we saw in the beginning. Perhaps this is the great challenge of Vincentian congregations in our time. In other words, these groups are being invited to delve into the subjective level of people, into those most intimate levels where the true happiness of the human being and the will of God become the elements that provide life with integrity. It is at this level that mission is no longer a task but becomes a process that has been accepted in a responsible manner and is the whole reason for our existence, the heartbeat of our existence.

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<sup>84</sup> Pope Francis addresses this matter and states: *Something similar is happening with priests who are obsessed with protecting their free time. This is frequently due to the fact that people feel an overbearing need to guard their personal freedom, as though the task of evangelization was a dangerous poison rather than a joyful response to God's love which summons us to mission and makes us fulfilled and productive. Some resist giving themselves over completely to mission and thus end up in a state of paralysis and acedia. (Evangelii Gaudium, #81).*



That is how Vincent de Paul lived and was able to captivate others, accompanying them as a master in discernment as illustrated in the excellent work of Father Vinicius Teixeira, CM:

*His endearing mysticism did not allow him to place institutional demands above the will of God and the true good of each vocation. His gaze of faith made it possible for him to see the power of the Spirit acting in young men and women and modeling them according to the vocation they had received. His humility and clarity led him to learn from what he saw and heard from those who were edified by his faithfulness to the call that he had received from the Lord. Vincent possessed the inner freedom and practical wisdom of an experienced man of God and was an enthusiastic vocational animator<sup>85</sup>.*

Therefore, in response to the will of God who has taken the initiative in calling us, Vincent de Paul insisted that the Daughters of Charity, the members of the Confraternities and the missionaries should always be available to engage in the mission and should persevere in their charitable endeavor. Their lives should reflect gratitude and they should find strength in the One who has called them to their vocation.

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<sup>85</sup> Father Vinicius uses the example of M. Portail and Marguerite Naseau in order to reveal Vincent's ability in the area of vocational guidance which involved leading people to act in accord with the will of God. This is a very valuable work whose study is most profitable; cf. Vinicius Augusto Teixeira, *San Vicente de Paúl y el Misterio de la Vocación* [Saint Vincent de Paul and the Mystery of Vocation], Madrid, 2019, p. 82.

Thus, the vocational encouragement of Vincent de Paul begins with the certainty that *in this vocation we are very much in conformity with Our Lord Jesus Christ, who seems to have made his principal aim, in coming into this world, to assist poor people and to take care of them ... He sent me to bring Good News to the poor* (CCD:XI:98). There Vincent found the will of God for his life and thus, four centuries later, that vocation has the strength to make us *feel* and proclaim to others that it is in the Mission “*where God wants us*”<sup>86</sup>.

If all of this is clear and if we make this perceptible and tangible, then we can say that we have found the *principle* that sustains an authentic Vincentian vocational culture.

### **Vincentian vocational pedagogy: go out, see and call**

We place ourselves in the year 1617, in the midst of the foundational events that occurred at Folleville in January and at Châtillon in August. We are well aware of the fruit of each of these experiences: Folleville gave birth to the Congregation of the Mission and Châtillon to the Confraternities of Charity ... and a short-term result of this was the establishment of the Daughters of Charity in 1633. What happened at that time and continues to occur at the present time reveals a vocational pedagogy similar to that which Pope Francis spoke about when he made reference to viewing vocations from the perspective of the person of Jesus<sup>87</sup>.

<sup>86</sup> Vinicius Augusto Teixeira, *San Vicente de Paúl y el Misterio de la Vocación* [Saint Vincent de Paul and the Mystery of Vocation], Chapter III, *El misterio de la vocación de San Vicente* [The mystery of Saint Vincent's vocation], Madrid, 2019, p. 85-132.

<sup>87</sup> We refer to Pope Francis' message to the participants in the International Congress on Vocational Ministry, Rome, October 19-21, 2016

## 1. Vocational pedagogy in Folleville

It was during the cold winter month of January 1617 when Vincent de Paul found Madame de Gondi in the medieval castle in Folleville. In the small village of Gannes, a distance of about seven miles from Folleville, Vincent was requested to minister to a dying peasant (perhaps, the voice of God was being revealed in that request). Thus, Vincent, went out, saw and called.

**1.1. Vincent went out:** Without much hesitation, Vincent left the company of Marguerite de Silly. He did not remain in the comfort of the castle, but dared to leave. He became mobile when faced with a reality that invited him to make a resolution: move out and walk along this path because circumstances demand this ... and certainly not yet a saint, Vincent was sufficiently *sensitive* to understand and to hear the call to go out.

**1.2. Vincent saw:** More than four decades later, in 1658, Vincent told the missionaries what he saw that day. He saw a poor man on his deathbed, with an urgent need to confess the sins of his past. He saw that the Church had abandoned the poor country people. He saw Madame de Gondi attempting to resolve that tragedy. He saw Christ the Evangelizer of the poor, who was beginning to show him the path of his vocation. It is obvious that Vincent did not have his gaze (and his senses) numbed by that need to hurry here and there, to rush from one thing to another that overwhelms our days and prevents us from seeing the face of Christ and hearing the voice of the eternal caller.





**1.3. Vincent called:** The fruit of that event was revealed a few days later at a crucial moment:

*In the month of January 1617, and, on the twenty-fifth, the feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul, that lady asked me to preach a sermon in the church of Folleville to urge the people to make a general confession, which I did, pointing out to them its importance and usefulness. Then I taught them how to make it properly; and God had such regard for the confidence and good faith of that lady –for the large number and enormity of my sins would have hindered the success of this act– that he blessed what I said; and those good people were so moved by God that they all came to make their general confession. I continued to instruct them and to prepare them for the sacraments, and I began to hear their confessions. But there was such a large crowd that, even with the help of another priest, I could not hear them all. Madame sent someone to ask the Jesuits of Amiens to come to assist us, writing to the Rector, who came himself. Since he could not stay very long, he sent Fr. Fourche of the same Company to take his place. The latter helped us hear confessions, preach, and teach the catechism and, by the mercy of God, found plenty to keep him busy. Next, we went to the other villages belonging to Madame in that area, and did the same as in the first one. There was a huge crowd, and God gave his blessing everywhere (CCD:XI:3-4).*

Vincent de Paul was very sensitive to the voice of God, and so he began to call. He called together the men and women who were living on the De Gondi estate to listen to his sermon. He called these poor men and women to make a general confession of their sins. There were so many people in need, that Vincent called the priests of the Society of Jesus to help him. Later, he called other men who would also be engaged in this vocational mission adventure ... and would spend their whole life in that form of service.

## 2. Vocational pedagogy in Châtillon-les-Dombes

Twenty-eight years after having served as pastor at Châtillon-les-Dombes, Vincent was explaining the Rules to the Daughters of Charity, and during that conference he explained what had occurred in August 1617:

*I, though unworthy, was pastor of a small parish. As I was about to give the sermon, someone came to tell me there was an indigent man who was sick and very badly lodged in a poor barn. I was informed of his illness and poverty in such terms that, moved by compassion, I made a strong plea, speaking with such feeling that all the ladies were touched by it. More than fifty of them set out from the town, and I did the same. When I visited him, I found him in such a state that I judged it wise to hear his confession. As I was taking the Blessed Sacrament to him, I met the ladies returning in droves, and God gave me this thought: "Could not these good ladies be brought together and encouraged to give themselves to God to serve the sick poor?" As*



*a follow-up, I pointed out to them that these great needs could very easily be alleviated. They immediately resolved to see to it. Afterward, the Charity was established in Paris to do here what all of you can see (CCD:IX:165-166).*

- 2.1. Vincent went out:** Once again the voice of God was manifested in a message that reached the ears of the then pastor. Once again Vincent moved out from the shadows and the security of parish structures. He went out to journey along the same path as that which the people of the village travelled. He went out and was driven by the voice of God that does not allow sterile stillness on the part of those who are *sensitive* to the Spirit of God.
- 2.2. Vincent saw:** Vincent saw once again the face of illness and poverty and he stopped, just as Christ stopped to see and explore, on a deeper level, the needs of the lepers ... and when Vincent paused, he discovered the urgent need to bring the Blessed Sacrament to the individual involved. At the same time, Vincent did not just see fifty people on the road (as many others may have seen), but his gaze saw hearts eager to engage in charitable service, people who lacked organization and formation. As a result, he saw all of this as an opportunity to begin a new work that *felt* as though it was *the will of God*. Where others saw the black and white situation of need, Vincent saw the colors of God's call that indicated that the time had come to make the Gospel effective through organized charity.



**2.3. Vincent called:** Not content with the great generosity of the people, Vincent called together a group of women in order to set in motion a new charitable project<sup>88</sup>. This first group of people who were called, began a chain of called individuals that has extended to the present time, more than four hundred years after that first call ... and those who have been called continue to call others to participate in the charity of Christ that urges us.

The vocational journey, as explained by Pope Francis, seems to coincide with Vincent's vocational proposal: to go out, to see and to call. Those three verbs provide us with sufficient material to concretize, from the time of the origin of the Vincentian charism, those actions that will enable us to build an authentic vocational culture.

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<sup>88</sup> The document concerning the establishment of this first Confraternity of Charity is found in CCD:XIIIa:3-5.



## Chapter V:

### COORDINATES FOR A VINCENTIAN VOCATIONAL CULTURE

The task of pilots is to locate the coordinates for their flight and then guide the plane in accord with those coordinates. As seen in the first section of this book, the terrain over which we fly with regard to the vocational culture is already known, but it needs to be mapped out in time and space. We are going to frame this work with four coordinates that could be plotted out as a Cartesian plan. This will allow us to plan what we have to do with regard to each specific detail of the proposal for creating a Vincentian Culture of Vocations.

Our landing point is to find, from the perspective of the Vincentian charism, an authentic vocational pedagogy that will allow us to confront the current challenges. To get there, we will need to broaden our horizon and ask questions that, at first glance, may seem somewhat obvious, but that, when it comes to reaping the fruits, reveal that on many occasions, common sense is the least common of the senses. Let us begin, then, with a question posed on another occasion:

*Why, while some congregations, especially those recently founded, are seeing an increase in vocations, historical congregations like ours, pioneers in the field of formation and vocations, are experiencing a decline?*<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Rolando Gutierrez, *Cultura Vocacional Vicentina*, Research for a Degree in Vocational Ministry at the CEBITEPAL in Bogota, 2015.



Before opening the coordinate monitor, it is wise to listen to the sages. That is why it is only fair that we should recall here some words spoken by the then priest, Joseph Ratzinger, who, in 1969 (more than half a century ago), was interviewed on a German radio station and recognizing the limit of his analysis, humbly expressed his vision of the future of the Church:

*From the crisis of today the Church of tomorrow will emerge — a Church that has lost much. She will become small and will have to start afresh more or less from the beginning. She will no longer be able to inhabit many of the edifices she built in prosperity. As the number of her adherents diminishes, so it will lose many of her social privileges. In contrast to an earlier age, it will be seen much more as a voluntary society, entered only by free decision. As a small society, it will make much bigger demands on the initiative of her individual members ... In faith and prayer she will again recognize the sacraments as the worship of God and not as a subject for liturgical scholarship. The Church will be a more spiritual Church, not presuming upon a political mandate, flirting as little with the Left as with the Right. It will be hard going for the Church, for the process of crystallization and clarification will cost her much valuable energy. It will make her poor and cause her to become the Church of the meek. The process will be all the more arduous, for sectarian narrow-mindedness as well as pompous self-will will have to be shed. One may predict that all of this will take time. The process will be*





*long and wearisome as was the road from the false progressivism on the eve of the French Revolution –when a bishop might be thought smart if he made fun of dogmas and even insinuated that the existence of God was by no means certain– to the renewal of the nineteenth century. But when the trial of this sifting is past, a great power will flow from a more spiritualized and simplified Church. Men in a totally planned world will find themselves unspeakably lonely. If they have completely lost sight of God, they will feel the whole horror of their poverty. Then they will discover the little flock of believers as something wholly new. They will discover it as a hope that is meant for them, an answer for which they have always been searching in secret. And so it seems certain to me that the Church is facing very hard times. The real crisis has scarcely begun. We will have to count on terrific upheavals. But I am equally certain about what will remain at the end: not the Church of the political cult, which is dead already, but the Church of faith. It may well no longer be the dominant social power to the extent that she was until recently; but it will enjoy a fresh blossoming and be seen as man's home, where he will find life and hope beyond death<sup>90</sup>.*

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<sup>90</sup> The complete text was published by Aleteia and can be read at: <https://aleteia.org/2016/06/13/when-cardinal-joseph-ratzinger-predicted-the-future-of-the-church/>. Amedeo Cencini was inspired by this text when writing his book, entitled, *Abrazar el Futuro con Esperanza* [Embrace the future with hope], Cantabria, 2018, Kindle Edition.



## Authentic prophecy

The Old Testament prophets were always subject to moments of crisis. That was the price they paid for proclaiming their message to a generation that, in principle, was uncomfortable with the message but, in due time, the prophetic seed bore fruit.

Prophecy, in a Christian sense, should not be viewed as predicting the future or as a task that is merely concerned about social interests, as perhaps understood by some extremes in Latin American theology. Only a few decades ago, individuals were seen as prophetic the more they participated in protests and movements in defense of the more vulnerable members of society. While these are options that must be clearly made as part of the prophetic implications of a Vincentian vocation, in no way can being prophetic be viewed from the perspective of Pietism or some outdated form of Marxism.

Prophecy is about proclaiming the truth that goes beyond our gaze. It is the art of recognizing the seeds of the Word in the midst of the reality where we are on pilgrimage. It is also the art of interpreting the signs of the time and of pointing out paths that make known the great news of the Kingdom to a world that, apparently, is seldom willing to listen to it.

*It is precisely these prophets that consecrated life needs today: men and women with penetrating eyes and alert to capture the seeds of new life that appear in consecrated life, not only in new forms but also in traditional forms ... seeds that everyone is able to recognize. Seeds that are signs of something original and authentic that is coming to life in relation to the charism, coming to life as a result of experiences from new models*





*of leadership, from new styles of proclamation and acting, from new ways of providing initial and on-going formation, from various ways of sharing the charism with the laity<sup>91</sup>.*

Here we have the first coordinate of a vocational culture for the Vincentian Family. As present day followers of the Founder, we need to assume the prophetic vision, especially at this time when the vocational challenge has made us aware that something seems to have died, but also has made us aware that something new is being born.

What is the truth that we must communicate today? ... the truth that makes the human heart groan and also does the same for the men and women of the postmodern generation that we refer to as the liquid culture, that generation that prefers to feel rather than think, that lives between waves of individualism and subjectivism, that endures the crisis of a society that is not educated in matters of love. Yes, we are dealing with a different generation, one which, devoid of pharisaical prejudices, shares the same human nature as the Word who became flesh in order to make salvation a reality and who gave himself completely to the proclamation of the grace of prophecy: the gospel of vocation.

*That is the essence of consecrated life, to reveal this desire to men and women, to recognize it and to energize it even when it is ignored, lost, choked, restricted, denied and the object of ridicule<sup>92</sup>.*

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<sup>91</sup> Amedeo Cencini, *Abrazar el Futuro con Esperanza* [Embrace the future with hope], Cantabria, 2018, Kindle Edition.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*



We will be able to build a vocational culture to the degree that our vision is able to move beyond the present horizons and then with the prophetic vision of Vincent de Paul we develop *the ability to discern pathways where others only see walls, to recognize potential where others see only peril (Christus Vivit, #67).*

The Vincentian charism is in the hands of two prophetic instruments, par excellence ... instruments that are able to awaken a thirst for the truth in the hearts of men and women: charity on behalf of those who are poor and mission on behalf of those persons who are abandoned. How many people are challenged by the life of Father Pedro Opeka, CM<sup>93</sup> and the Akamasoa project? Can anyone deny that a charity-mission work of that magnitude can awaken a *sensitivity* to the value of generosity and commitment on behalf of those who are poor, including those who have visited that work as part of their Madagascar tourism package?

The invitation to a prophetic lifestyle is a source of fresh water that, when assumed in a transparent manner, renews congregational life and structures. At this point, one must be prophetically able to correctly balance fidelity-creativity without falling into the trap of attempting to be in harmony with present ideological currents.

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<sup>93</sup> Pedro Opeka is a priest of the Congregation of the Mission, the son of Slovenian immigrants. He was born in San Martín, Argentina in 1948. After his ordination in 1975, he traveled to Madagascar, where he has impacted the life of thousands of people, especially through the establishment of the Akamasoa project. This project has provided decent housing and work to people who once lived in a garbage dump. During his formation, he studied under Father Jorge Mario Bergoglio (Pope Francis) and has been nominated for various international awards, including the Nobel Peace Prize.



A good example of prophecy can be found in the way leadership is exercised. This requires us to suppress those styles of power that confuse evangelical authority (whose purpose is service) with a focus on personalities and do so to the detriment of community maturity. A prophetic congregation knows how to place the service of authority in fidelity to the foundational essence but contextualized in the present time. The world, falsely called *post-Christian*, has a great sensitivity to leaders like Pope Francis and Pedro Opeka, prophets who ground their leadership on the gospel of the suffering servant rather than on the temptation for power.

Another aspect that must be discerned in a balanced manner refers to the prophetic forms and the signs that we must communicate in a language that is in accord with our reality. We can debate the pros and cons with regard to new expressions of piety and clerical clothing. In general, those who are members of traditional forms of consecrated life and reflect upon the vocational spring experienced by newly established congregations, usually reach simplistic conclusions ... and although not without foundation, those conclusions are very poor in their sensitivity toward individuals of a newer generation.

Certainly no one can deny that there are an abundance of religious expressions that claim to love *the God whom they do not see*, but are not concerned about their poor brothers and sisters whom we assume they should see. But what if they really do not see?<sup>94</sup> What if some of these religious expressions are the only opportunity that we have to offer people a path to mature in the faith and in their vocational discernment? Certainly it would be easier for us if young people approached

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<sup>94</sup> Cf. Stefano Guarinelli, *El Sacerdote Inmaduro* [The Immature Priest], p. 79



us whose motivation was in complete harmony with following Jesus Christ, the evangelizer of the poor ... but the task of the prophet has never been to seek that which is easy.

With regard to habits and clerical dress, we should ask ourselves: is this, as some claim, a prophetic sign that was mistakenly interpreted after the Council? Could it be that this question is a remnant of a Christianity that offers external security to a young generation that lacks internal security and therefore, clings to clerical clothing as a result of inconsistencies in their identity.

Pope Francis' response to this question is very clear: *I believe the sign, no doubt, does well, but I do not hold on to it. You have to see each case. One can wear a clerical habit or clothing and be worldly.*<sup>95</sup>

Furthermore I agree with Father José Rafael Prada, C.Ss.R.<sup>96</sup>, who stated: *I think the religious habit (and the same could be said of clerical dress) used as a symbol of transcendence and eternity, can, on many occasions be an evangelizing instrument. It may not be appropriate or practical to use in a secularized world, but can be appropriate in an apostolic, liturgical or community setting*<sup>97</sup>.

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<sup>95</sup> Pope Francis, *The Strength of a Vocation: Consecrated life Today*, A Conversation with Fernando Prado, CMF, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2018, p. 76.

<sup>96</sup> Father Prada is a Redemptorist who has a Doctorate in Psychology with a specialization in counseling and clinical therapy. He has broad experience in the area of formation and is the author of multiple publications.

<sup>97</sup> José Rafael Prada, *Psicología y Formación: Principios psicológicos utilizados en la formación para el sacerdocio y la vida consagrada* [Psychology and Formation: Psychological Principles utilized in formation for the priesthood and consecrated life], Bogota, 1995, p. 13.





We cannot deny that habits and clerical dress are sometimes used as a sign of power, distinction and privilege. Such clothing can be used to resolve inappropriately the problem of identity. To demonize, however, the use of clerical clothing is to fall into the fallacy of comparing two erroneous premises that will lead to a mistaken solution.

Without denying anything that has been said, we must also say that *the cold is not in the blankets*. When dealing with members of a new generation who are more sensitive, who see more power in images than arguments, who live in a world that is ever more secularized and in which privileges flowing from *clerical status* have become ever more restricted, clothing can be a prophetic sign when accompanied by credible witness. Otherwise it will only be a disguise that is defended with theological arguments but actually responds to psychological reasons. At the same time we also have to ask: what if individuals, in their unconsciousness, have a psychological reason rather than a theological reason that makes them feel more comfortable dressing like everyone else in order not to draw attention to themselves, and thus, put aside any obligation to give witness in order to avoid any form of public pressure? This situation would have to be analyzed in greater depth.

In any case, it is undeniable that the members of this present generation (as distinct from those persons who were born before the 1990's) have a greater affinity for the visual. Therefore, to limit oneself to rational analysis fails to respond to the need to incarnate the vocational message.

In summary, we may be able to develop the best vocational promotion plans, the best advertisements, but if we are not prophetic signs to this new generation, then we have nothing to say to them and nothing to offer them. There is no point in





committing one's life to a group that can promise nothing better than the entertainment and pleasures that the world offers them. Therefore:

*A concern with regard to the crisis of a reduced number of candidates should not be the primary motivation for our ministry on behalf of young people, rather we should be impelled by a vocational culture and a missionary passion to proclaim Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor ... this Jesus who continues to call young people today in order to continue his mission* (Final Document of the First Meeting of Vocational Ministers, IV:1).

In the Acts of the Apostles, the message of Philip, the deacon, is credible and draws the attention of the Samaritans not because of the compelling arguments that it offers, but because of the prophetic signs that people heard and saw and experienced (Acts 8:6-8). In the life of the apostles, passion for Christ enabled them to put aside personal concerns in order to give priority to the signs that revealed God's love, signs that called them together and that challenged them.

*Without the enamored passion for Jesus, there is no possible future for consecrated life ... It's about getting out of oneself, being passionate about Jesus in love, with a burning heart and maybe this would become the future for others. We show the way to others with our own life, we help them, we accompany them ... always walking the path. Without allowing the water to stop running. As I have said it in the past when talking about the Church, I'd also say*





*that consecrated life is like water: if it's stagnant, it putrifies*<sup>98</sup>.

### **Radicalness or extinction**

This subtitle can appear quite forceful: if there is no radicalness, there will certainly be extinction. Too bold a statement? In order to understand it, we must resort once again to the exercise of clarifying concepts, especially since in certain countries extremism is synonymous with terrorism or since such concepts bring to mind an unpleasant chapter of our history as church, for example, the Inquisition. People can find the word *radicalness* to be repulsive.

*The extremist position is distinct from the radical position. Nevertheless, radicalness is frequently used as a synonym for extremism. Yet, etymologically it has another dimension that allows it to overcome the stumbling into which extremism often terminates. By its very semantic nature, radicalism comes from the word, radix (root) which means the inner depth from which a reality is seen and lived. The other factors that make up the whole are not censored (typically extreme position), but it goes to the heart of all of them, from where they all start and from where they all project themselves with a specific nuance and hue ... to a large extent, the recent crisis of consecrated life, as well as the sterility of many attempts to reform different charisms, stem*

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<sup>98</sup> Pope Francis, *The Strength of a Vocation: Consecrated Life Today*, A Conversation with Fernando Prado, CMF, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2018., p. 35-36.





*from the enthusiastic exercise of this reduction of the extremist position: instead of going to the heart of an object, to its root, one is content to remain on one of its branches. "To move among the branches", as we say colloquially, is to take a position that attempts to bury the past by calling it useless and no longer relevant or else we cling to the past, through thick and thin, as people who decide their life while at the same time the onslaught of mummification approaches<sup>99</sup>.*

Therefore, when we talk about radicalness, we are referring to a movement to the root, to that which is fundamental in a charism. This concept is far removed from any attempt to revive, in the name of radicalness, former ascetical practices or to seek an archaeological reconstruction of the Founder's era. When we return to the origins and the sources, it is *to live the present and build for the future*<sup>100</sup>.

Radicalness as a vocational coordinate implies reviving the inspiration of the Holy Spirit who gave a proper identity to the life and ministry of Vincent de Paul which then became crystallized as a foundational charism in the institutions that he established. Radicalness is to calibrate the thermometer of fidelity-creativity in order to guide our being and work in total dependence on the specific vocation to which we have been called. This seems to be a task that would be very brief, but in

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<sup>99</sup> Jesus Sanz Montes, *La Fidelidad Creativa: Itinerario de Renovación de la Vida Consagrada* [Creative Fidelity: The Journey of the Renewal of Consecrated Life], Madrid, 2017, p. 108-109.

<sup>100</sup> Pope Francis, *The Strength of a Vocation: Consecrated Life Today*, A Conversation with Fernando Prado, CMF, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2018, p. 33.





reality it runs the risk of being interpreted in a partial manner and in a manner that justifies one's attitude. Therefore, in order to understand Vincentian radicalness, we return to the serious study that Father Getulio Motta Grossi, CM offers us.

Grossi unflinchingly states that *according to Saint Vincent, our purpose, our option for the poor is exclusive not just preferential*<sup>101</sup>. The author understands the concept of *exclusivity* in light of the theology of spousal alliance.

*To leave the poor in order to reach out "to others" is adultery for the Vincentian. It is prostitution similar to the adultery and the prostitution of God's people as described by the prophet Hosea. It is condemning us to sterility and extinction. The "exclusive" exclusivity of our option for the poor must mirror, even if palely, the exclusivity of God's spousal love with his people, and of Jesus with the Church. The exclusivity of which, according to Paul in his letter to the Ephesians, means that the love of Christian spouses must be, as far as possible, a faithful mirror. This Christian spousal covenant helps us to understand our option for the poor.*

*The love of spouses is not a selfish love, closed to others, limited to two. Rather, like spousal love, it is a mission in the world and in the Church, exclusive and excluding other covenants and preferences of love*<sup>102</sup>.

<sup>101</sup> Getulio Motta Grossi, *Um Místico da Missão, Vicente de Paulo* (Vincent de Paul: A mystic of mission), Belo Horizonte, 2016, p.88.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102-103.



Indeed, Grossi enables us to understand radical love from the perspective of conjugal love between the followers of the Vincent de Paul and the poor. This is done in the same way that the cross of Calvary, the most radical expression of love in the history of humankind, establishes a conjugal covenant between Christ and the Church. This is the vocational coordinate that we are looking for.

During the various years in which we have accompanied vocational processes for men and women between the ages of seventeen and thirty-five, it is significant that the most attractive consecration options for young people (options between several dozen congregations and institutes who are working together) are reduced to less than half of the congregations.

*At the present time, the religious institutes that are endowed with vocational attractiveness seem to be those that highlight the evangelical ideal and its ability to touch the human heart. Young people have a need for these powerful perspectives (such as the gospel and its incomparable strength) that combine gift and demand and that offer the maximum while at the same time demand everything ... and therefore it is worthwhile for young people to commit the whole of their life<sup>103</sup>.*

If the Congregation of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity and other Vincentian establishments are not able to communicate the passionate experience of living this radicalness, then the

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<sup>103</sup> Amedeo Cencini, *Nuevas Realidades en Materia Vocacional* [New Realities in Vocational Matters], presentation at the International Congress on Vocational Ministry (Rome, 2016).





service of charity and the mission, no matter how much we might plan and advertise, is condemned to extinction.

Let us now examine Vincentian radicalness from three dimensions that are integral to our charismatic identity: *mysticism, mission and communion*.

## 1. Radicalness in mysticism

*The missionary destiny, or better, the missionary design and predestination and the design and predestination of the poor is a single spiritual experience that arises from affective and active contemplation of Jesus, evangelizer of the poor, present in abandoned poor men and women<sup>104</sup>.*

The spiritual patrimony of the Vincentian Family is tremendous and enriching. We must be ever more aware of the fact that we are able to offer the world an experience of being mystics in mission and charity. Each missionary, each Sister, each member of the worldwide Vincentian Family must realize that they are to help young people realize that we are not simply members of an institution but rather that we are followers of Someone who has given meaning to our life and as a result filled our hearts with joy and fulfillment. It is impossible for a loving heart to hide, and those who are loving are also, by nature, calling and inviting others to participate in that same love. Yet, without an on-going experience of contemplation and without a life of assiduous prayer, we can easily become mission theorists rather than mystics, like Vincent de Paul.

<sup>104</sup> Gertulio, Mota Grossi, *Um Místico da Missão, Vicente de Paulo* [Vincent de Paul: A mystic of mission], Belo Horizonte, 2016, p. 82





Following this line of thought, we have three pearls in our spirituality, which if cleaned with the cloth of radicalness, will generate a force of natural attractiveness and touch the hearts of the members of new generations. First, we are referring to the embrace of a radical obedience in the midst of a world that appears to offer licentiousness as an absolute value. Second, we are invited to reflect on the “scandal” of being chaste and living evangelical purity<sup>105</sup> because we are called to live a missionary mysticism in a manner that maintains our hearts undivided. Third, we give a special emphasis to living poverty in a radical manner, not only as a matter that we interpret internally in accord with minimum juridical guidelines, but rather as a visible expression that questions a society inspired by materialism and consumerism. Without a doubt, when our vows are lived in this manner, they become three signs of radicalness that give life to a vocational culture.

The sensitivity of young men and women creates a thirst for radicalness and they instinctively know when they are in the midst of a mystical community. They know when a group is inspired and animated by Jesus Christ and they also know when a group has lost the fervor of a life rooted in the Lord.

## 2. Radicalness in mission

We have seen the statistics of our ministries. A majority of the efforts of the Congregation are invested in parish ministry.

<sup>105</sup> With regard to formation in purity, I recommend the publication that brought together the presentations that were given during the V Study Week for Seminary Formators in the Priestly Formation Center at the Pontifical University of Santa Cruz (February 2018). These are found in the book entitled: *Amar y Enseñar a Amar. La formación de la Afectividad en los Candidatos al Sacerdocio* [To love and to teach to love: affective formation in candidates to the priesthood], Coordinated by Francisco Javier Insa Gómez, Madrid, 2019.





No, we are not going to suggest leaving parishes immediately as a way to establish a vocational culture. Nevertheless, this is an opportune moment *to promote a review of the works of the provinces and to do this from the paradigm that a Vincentian vocational culture offers us* (Final Document of the First Meeting of Vocational Ministers, V:1).

This means putting aside our habit of explaining our charism through our works and instead allowing the works, in themselves, to speak about our charism. This also signifies getting to the root of the matter, returning to the original inspiration in order to discover if, in the twenty-first century, each one of the houses and works of the province represents the inspiration that the Holy Spirit placed in the heart of Saint Vincent. In other words, we must analyze if we, as evangelizers of the poor, are having an impact on current situations or if we have forgotten our vocation as formators.<sup>106</sup>

Unless we undertake this task with determination and radicalness, we will simply continue to justify our customs and sentiments that are so often attached to certain works even though they may no longer respond to the prophetic and radical sense that our Vincentian charism has inherited. As

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<sup>106</sup> With regard to the service of formation today, there is a need to rethink whether the scandals, crises and pastoral deficiencies in the lives of priests (as identified by Pope Francis) are a call to reevaluate the service of priestly formation as a proper ministry of the Congregation of the Mission. It is true that the *aggiornamento* which we attempted to live after the Second Vatican Council, caused the closure of many seminaries that we had administered (and that was considered to be the most appropriate thing at that time). Today, however, when the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* refers to distinct formation services which previously had been referred to as formators (making no distinction between professors, spiritual directors, pastoral formators, etc.) ... perhaps this is the time for a reflection that will help us evaluate if this is not a service that the signs of the time are calling us to take up.





Father Grossi has denounced, this is the manner in which we prostitute our vocation<sup>107</sup>, the manner in which we close ourselves off from others. Pope Francis has also addressed this situation:

*Please, let's not turn our institutes into a closed army. Let's not take refuge in a task to avoid the operative capacity of the charism. Tasks serve to the extent to which we carry them out properly. Once they go out of style, either we renew them or it might be better to leave them<sup>108</sup>.*

It might be appropriate to apply the systemic change approach to our congregations in order to create a transformation of those structures that generate a poverty of criteria and a spiritual coldness that result in lukewarm missionaries who accommodate themselves to other options that do not have the same radicalness as envisioned by Vincent.

*Love is inventive to infinity* (CCD:XI:131) and if we are not creative in rethinking our mission, then we will find it difficult to communicate the value of the Vincentian vocation in a manner that will attract others to follow Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor.

### 3. Radicalness in community life

In our situation, community life *has been a special characteristic of the Congregation and its usual way of living from its very beginning* (Constitutions, #21.1) and it is also the

<sup>107</sup> Gertulio Mota Grossi, *Um Místico da Missão, Vicente de Paulo* [Vincent de Paul: A mystic of mission], Belo Horizonte, 2016, p. 88

<sup>108</sup> Pope Francis, *The Strength of a Vocation: Consecrated life Today*, A Conversation with Fernando Prado, CMF, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2018, p. 46.



place where the members are constantly formed in a lifestyle of simplicity, humility, gentleness, mortification and zeal.

This vocational coordinate of radicalness is also in harmony with Vincent's charismatic insight when he affirmed that *workers will multiply, attracted by the perfume of such charity* (CCD:II:258). Those of us who have the opportunity to work with young men and women can properly affirm that *no form of secularism can resist the witness of a joyful community composed of happy individuals who share their joy*<sup>109</sup>.

In conclusion, we have a relationship between radicalness and vocational promotion ministry that is woven by the law of attraction: radical communities attract men and women who feel challenged by that radicalness and end up feeling seduced by the Christ who is encountered there. In the midst of the secularism of the twenty first century and the liquid culture of new generations, the law of attraction remains constant: *wherever there is life, fervor, and a desire to bring Christ to others, genuine vocations will arise* (*Evangelii Gaudium*, #107). Sadly, however, the opposite is also true, mediocrity, like any pandemic, is contagious:

*Sociologists affirm that when this quality [radicalness] is weak, the institution attracts mediocre members who will not raise any questions. This is a bitter but very real affirmation that is confirmed by facts: mediocrity calls the mediocre*<sup>110</sup>.

<sup>109</sup> Amedeo Cencini, *Abrazar el Futuro con Esperanza* [Embrace the Future with Hope], Cantabria, 2018, Kindle Edition.

<sup>110</sup> Amedeo Cencini, *Nuevas Realidades en Materia Vocacional* (New Realities in Vocational Matters), presentation at the International Congress on Vocational Ministry (Rome, 2016).



In all of this, we sustain what we stated at the beginning: *radicalness or extinction*. If we do not return to the sources, we might continue to live on, but that existence will be one of sterile conformity that is so tempting when we are overwhelmed with well-intentioned fatigue because we tell ourselves: *we have worked hard all night and have caught nothing* (Luke 5:5). Then, there is the danger of falling into mediocre conclusions:

*Why should we attempt that which is impossible? That seems to be the reasoning of the incorrigible realist. Since perfection is impossible, we settle for an honest form of consecrated or priestly life, that is, a mediocre, bland life, a life that has no passion. It is like saying: goodbye holiness ... and thus we canonize mediocrity<sup>111</sup>.*

Yes, it is precisely in the midst of this desolate situation that the call of Christ takes on new meaning, a call that revitalizes the perspective of our own vocation and that invites us to put aside our fishing nets and become fishers of men and women. In that way a vocational culture is created and our radical options lead us *to leave everything and follow the Lord* (Luke 5:11)

### **Rejuvenate or grow old**

Anyone who has read the Apostolic Exhortation, *Christus Vivit*, is certainly familiar with these two opposing words: *youth*, which Pope Francis uses as a theological category and

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<sup>111</sup> Amedeo Cencini, *La Hora de Dios. La Crisis en la Vida del Creyente* [The hour of God. The Crisis in the Life of the Believer], Bogota, p. 293.







*ecclesial sclerosis*, which is diametrically opposed to the first word. It is from this perspective that we refer to the third coordinate that allows us to put in place a Vincentian Vocational Culture.

To fulfill our objective it will be necessary to view the Vincentian charism, with its four centuries of history, from the perspective of *youth* which should be understood in terms of the magisterial document that identifies youth not so much as a stage in life composed of a number of years, but rather as the Pope states: *youth is more than simply a period of time; it is a state of mind (Christus Vivit, #34)*. Later, Pope Francis affirms that *the Church is young when she shows herself capable of constantly returning to her source (Christus Vivit, #35)*

In the Pope's refreshing theology, ecclesial structures and Vincentian institutions have only two paths open to them: either they are revitalized in Christ *who is the true youthfulness of a world grown old (Christus Vivit, #32)* or they simply enclose themselves in their secure dwellings which in turn makes them mediocre, aged and as a result they begin to suffer from ecclesial sclerosis (cf. *Christus Vivit, #35*). At the same time, this ecclesial sclerosis drains the members of their creativity and their ability to savor the mission and as a result, their "vinegar faces" scare away anyone discerning a vocation.

The theological category of *youth*, viewed from three aspects and as understood by Pope Francis in *Christus Vivit*, will help us achieve a Vincentian Vocational Culture.

- 1. Clothe oneself in love:** *Jesus, himself eternally young, wants to give us hearts that are ever young ... he invites us to strip ourselves of the "old self" and to put on a young self (Colossians 3:9,10). In a word, true youth*



*means having a heart capable of loving (Christus Vivit, #13).*

If the spirituality of the Vincentian missionary can be synthesized in the Pauline expression that Vincent repeated so often: *to put on the Spirit of Jesus Christ*, then we would have to conclude that today, the visible consequence of living the charism is the rejuvenation of ourselves as we search for the most creative means to love *with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows* (CCD:X1:32) ... loving Christ as the center of our lives, loving affectively and effectively the poor whom we serve, loving our confreres and companions on the road, loving our vocation and our charism, in a word, loving as passionate young people love. On the other hand, it is characteristic of ecclesial sclerosis to confuse maturity with the loss of love and passion.

Our exterior can be made over to look youthful but only a young loving heart will attract other hearts that also have a desire to love ... and with regard to the direct accompaniment of young people, experience shows that young men and women are very sensitive to the reality of being accompanied by love (in the manner of Christ) and being manipulated as a result of other interests. In summary, listening to young people helps us to rejuvenate ourselves

**2. Missionary conversion:** *Young hearts are naturally ready to change, to turn back, get up and learn from life (Christus Vivit, #12).*

Resignation to the aging process is the clearest symptom of congregational sclerosis. The ability to see the past with gratitude and to fill ourselves with healthy pride in light of so many stories of distinguished Missionaries and heroic Sisters



should not deter us from engaging in an objective examination of our personal and community failings. Such an examination should lead us to make prophetic and radical resolutions to rise up anew and allow ourselves to be taught by life.

How many crises in our lives have become an opportunity for maturing, conversion and fulfillment? Living from a defensive position, without putting on the lens of a vocational culture in order to confront our way of living and serving, can become our worst enemy, one that attacks us continually and silently.

Missionary conversion is the proper state of the Vincentian charism lived from the perspective of youthfulness.

**3. Dream big:** *Young people are not meant to become discouraged; they are meant to dream great things, to seek vast horizons, to aim higher, to take on the world, to accept challenges and to offer the best of themselves to the building of something better (Christus Vivit, #15).*

Only a dreamer like Vincent de Paul could inspire others to leave everything in order to dedicate their lives, with no recognition or glory, to service on behalf of the poor. Only a greatly inspired individual would have dared to expand his recently established Congregation and have the Missionaries and the Sisters begin to minister in places beyond the European continent. Vincent always maintained his youthfulness, even when he was almost eighty years old ... and Vincentians of the twenty-first century need to revitalize their ability to dream.

Pope Francis reminds us about the biblical example of the rich young man:



*In the Gospel of Matthew we find a young man (cf. 19:20-22) who approaches Jesus and asks if there is more that he can do (v. 20); in this, he demonstrates that youthful openness of spirit which seeks new horizons and great challenges. Yet his spirit was not really that young, for he had already become attached to riches and comforts. He said he wanted something more, but when Jesus asked him to be generous and distribute his goods, he realized that he could not let go of everything he had. In the end, "hearing these words, the young man went away sad" (v. 22). He had given up his youth (Christus Vivit, #18).*

Today, the Vincentian Family has the great challenge of dreaming like Vincent de Paul. In order to do this, we need to enter into a spirit of missionary conversion and clothe ourselves with a love that rejuvenates us. Let us not surrender our vocational youthfulness! This is a coordinate that we must take very seriously in order to create a true vocational culture. Perhaps it is there that we will find a new congregational Pentecost where languages and cultures multiply (a characteristic of the new global reality). Then with multiple languages and cultures we will also be able to understand one another because of the charismatic fire that burns in our hearts that are enflamed with a youthfulness in charity and mission.

### ***Time is superior to space***

The fourth and final vocational coordinate we find explained as one of the four principles that Pope Francis spoke



about in *Evangelii Gaudium*<sup>112</sup>, namely, *time is greater than space*. This principle is found in *Evangelii Gaudium* #222, *Amoris Laetitia* #3 and 261, *Laudato Si'* #178 and *Christus Vivit* #297. But what is the meaning of those words, *time is greater than space*? Let us explain these words from the perspective of Vincent de Paul's work.

As we know, during the years immediately following the events of Folleville and Châtillon (1617) Vincent, already concerned about the spiritual and material misery of the people, began to preach popular missions to the poor country people, always concluding with the establishment of a Confraternity of Charity. In the beginning, these popular missions were given on the de Gondi estate, for example in Villepreux, Joigny and Montmirail (we know that Vincent gave a mission there in 1618 and in fact, Coste tells us that the Rule for the Confraternity in that town was drawn up on October 1, 1618) (CCD:XIIIb:29-34).

In 1620 Madame de Gondi entrusted Saint Vincent with the instruction of three heretics and we assume, from the context, that these individuals were Huguenots<sup>113</sup>. Vincent de Paul met with these individuals for two hours a day (for seven days) in the castle of Montmirail and at the end of those sessions two of them decided to embrace the Catholic faith. The third person told Vincent that he found it impossible to believe that the Spirit was present in and guiding the Church. Thanks to Abelly,

<sup>112</sup> When speaking about the common good and social peace, Pope Francis refers to four principles that should guide all activity: *time is greater than space, unity prevails over conflict, realities are more important than ideas and the whole is greater than the part* (*Evangelii Gaudium*, #222-237).

<sup>113</sup> In the seventeenth century "Huguenots" referred to a group of Protestants who were inspired by the Calvinist doctrine and had sought refuge in French towns during the War of Religions (1562-1568).

we have an extract from a conference in which Vincent shared his experience in this regard with his confreres:

*You told me, Monsieur, that the Church of Rome is led by the Holy Spirit, but I find that hard to believe because, on the one hand, we see the rural Catholics abandoned to pastors who are ignorant and given over to vice, with so little instruction in their duties that most of them hardly know what the Christian religion is. On the other hand, we see towns filled with priests and monks who are doing nothing; there are perhaps ten thousand of them in Paris, yet they leave the poor country people in this appalling state of ignorance in which they are lost. And you want to convince me that all this is being guided by the Holy Spirit! I will never believe it (CCD:XI:28).*

The conference indicates that Vincent was *deeply impressed by this objection* and came to a deeper understanding of the spiritual needs of the country people and of the obligation to assist them. Marie-Joëlle Guillaume commented on this event and stated: *Vincent saw, in the reaction of his interlocutor, a confirmation of the fact that the rural poor had to be an absolute priority. He also came to see the need to reform the clergy*<sup>114</sup>.

Vincent did not express his feelings to that man but instead gave him an argument to show him his mistake. In reality, Vincent did not fall into the temptation to seek an immediate solution in order to resolve the problem and then crown

<sup>114</sup> Marie-Joëlle Guillaume, *Vincent de Paul: Un saint au Gran Siècle*, [Vincent de Paul, a saint of the great century] p.141.



himself victorious in the dispute. Rather, for Vincent *time was greater than space* and far from any anxious reaction, this event led him to engage in a process that led to the establishment of two congregations.

In accord with Pope Francis' understanding, the Vincentian charism is also heir to the same conviction, *time is greater than space* and so we have the fourth coordinate to promote a Vincentian Vocational Culture.

*A constant tension exists between fullness and limitation. Fullness evokes the desire for complete possession, while limitation is a wall set before us. Broadly speaking, "time" has to do with fullness as an expression of the horizon which constantly opens before us, while each individual moment has to do with limitation as an expression of enclosure. People live poised between each individual moment and the greater, brighter horizon of the utopian future as the final cause which draws us to itself. Here we see a first principle for progress in building a people: time is greater than space (Evangelii Gaudium, #222).*

This principle that we assume as a vocational coordinate is not something new in Bergoglio's pastoral approach and, in fact, we know that during his time as archbishop of Buenos Aires, he explained it in different ways<sup>115</sup>.

<sup>115</sup> For example, In the 2010 conference in Buenos Aires, the then archbishop stated that Jesus rejected the request of the mother of the sons of Zebadee who requested that her sons be given a space to exercise [a position] power, rather he proposed that they follow him in his redemptive undertaking in time ... Juan Carlos Scannone, *La teología del pueblo. Raíces teológicas del Papa Francisco*, Cantabria, 2016.



In his exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, in order to explain the relationship between parents and their children, we find a rather enlightening example of the meaning of this coordinate for the Pontiff:

*Here it remains true that “time is greater than space.” In other words, it is more important to start processes than to dominate spaces. If parents are obsessed with always knowing where their children are and controlling all their movements, they will seek only to dominate space. But this is no way to educate, strengthen and prepare their children to face challenges. What is most important is the ability lovingly to help them grow in freedom, maturity, overall discipline and real autonomy. Only in this way will children come to possess the wherewithal needed to fend for themselves and to act intelligently and prudently whenever they meet with difficulties (Amoris Laetitia, #261).*

A vocational culture will only be possible if we attempt to build it by assuming that *time is greater than space*. We must do this in a way that is similar to that of Vincent de Paul when he was challenged by the Huguenot in Montmirail. That event created a new horizon in our Vincentian tradition and was not the offer of an immediate solution. Vincent seemed to offer a utopia rather than some mechanically constructed pastoral strategy. In fact, Vincent revealed his convictions, his sensitivity and his pedagogy, which in time, bore fruit.

*The following year, Vincent de Paul returned to Montmirail with M. Feron, at that time a*





*Bachelor of Theology, and later a Doctor of the Sorbonne and Archdeacon of Chartres; M. Duchesne, a Doctor at the same faculty and Archdeacon of Beauvais; and some priests and religious among his friends. He was coming to give the mission in that place and in the neighboring villages. The heretic was curious enough to attend the sermons and catechism lessons; he saw the care that was taken to instruct those who did not know the truths necessary for their salvation, the charity with which the priests adapted themselves to the weakness and slowness of mind of the most unrefined, and the marvelous effects the zeal of the Missioners brought about in the heart of the greatest sinners. Moved to tears, he went to find the saint and said to him, "Now I see that the Holy Spirit is guiding the Roman Church, since such care is taken in the instruction and salvation of poor village people; I'm ready to enter it whenever it will please you to receive me" (CCD:XI:29).*

The conversion of the Huguenot in Montmirail is an example of processes that mature over time rather than isolated actions that attempt to provide an immediate solution to complex problems. The Vincentian Family was born as a result of this process.

To create a vocational culture requires a prophetic gaze that sees beyond the present moment. It is also necessary to be passionate about a utopian vision in order to continue to believe in a process. This is especially true in relation to vocations because *things may not always work out as*



*expected*<sup>116</sup>. In the beginning, there are seldom immediate changes and in fact, there is often resistance to new proposals. On various occasions Vincent was misunderstood, but his love for Jesus Christ, always calling and inviting, and his dream about evangelization on behalf of the poor kept him radical at all times.

Creating processes for a vocational culture means focusing on the New Evangelization and allowing ourselves to be rejuvenated by that dream so that we take the necessary steps at every level: provincial, diocesan and local. It also means that we establish well-ordered stages that follow the logic of radicalness proper to that proper vocation. Of course, it also means patience (the patience that Jesus showed to his Apostles) and it implies numerous setbacks and constant evaluation, something that is natural when human beings engage in any activity. It is then that we, like the farmer, are firmly convinced that in time we will experience far more joy than is presently perceived.

To focus, however, on immediate space is the political attitude of governments who need to raise their flag during the years that they hold office. The desire for recognition eliminates processes in which people can be viewed as more important than structures. In the case of the Church, when that happens priority is given to the pastors' agenda rather than the needs of the people who so often find themselves in situations in which they are abandoned and seldom hear a voice that calls them and invites them to follow.

With regard to the path to create a vocational culture, care must be taken so that this coordinate of time is greater than

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<sup>116</sup> Amedeo Cencini, *Abrazar el Future con Esperanza* [Embrace the Future with Hope], Cantabria, 2018, Kindle Edition.





space is not interpreted as a reason for neglecting to address our lukewarmness. If that should happen, then a principle for action becomes a justification for a mediocre life. Looking at tomorrow (prophecy) means living the present in a radical manner.

*Although it is true, in fact, as Pope Francis says, that time is superior to space, openness to the future does not occur automatically, or through a spontaneous mathematical calculation of days that take place one after another. Such openness occurs only as the result of quality of life and living such a life<sup>117</sup>.*

Here the need arises to concretize a vocational pedagogy so that from the perspective of the charism of Saint Vincent, we know how to locate the coordinates of an authentic vocational culture.

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<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*





**PART THREE:**

**A VINCENTIAN  
VOCATIONAL PEDAGOGY**



In the second part, we attempted to develop a clear concept of a *vocational culture* which can only be understood from the perspective of the New Evangelization. From there, we saw the need for the proclamation of the Gospel of vocation which places on our shoulders a great responsibility to build a Vincentian vocational culture.

For this, it has been essential to identify the dimensions that make up a vocational culture *attitude, sensitivity and pedagogy* as well as the coordinates that locate our object of study in the current context.

With those elements we have established a parallel between the vocational proposal of Pope Francis<sup>118</sup> and the actions of Saint Vincent de Paul in the founding events of 1617, giving rise to a Vincentian vocational pedagogy that is expressed in three actions: go out, see and call.

In this third part, we are going to use those three verbs to map out a journey, a path that offers us guidelines that, in turn, enable us to build a Vincentian vocational culture.

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<sup>118</sup> Discourse of Pope Francis to the participants at the International Congress of Vocational Ministry, October 21, 2016.





## Chapter VI:

### A CHARISM THAT GOES OUT

*A Church that goes out* has become one of Pope Francis' themes. In light of that perspective (quite challenging, by the way) and in the context of the New Evangelization, which is the root of a vocational culture, we have the imperative to develop a *vocational ministry that goes out* and that, in our case, is revealed in a *charisma that goes out* or in a *congregation that goes out* or, if you prefer, in a *community that goes out*. We want, however, to avoid using concepts that are in vogue in order to communicate the impression of novelty to our readers ... as if we were competing in a fashion contest. To clothe ourselves in a *Vincentian charisma that goes out* is necessarily the first step in a pedagogy that enables us to build the long-awaited vocational culture.

*To go out* is to be understood as the indispensable attitude to arrive at the peripheries. It is a discomfort that the Holy Spirit places in those who have been called to leave unproductive securities. It is the call to shake off the dust that has become attached to our feet and that is not part of the essence of the charism to which we have been convoked.

*A community that goes out* is one that does not protect anything, does not protect any of its structures from the whirlwind of the Holy Spirit, but rather, feels invited to come out from behind the shadow of its safe roof and to go forth to meet those who are in need.

On the road to a vocational culture, this pedagogical first step confronts us with two implications: to *go out of* (to put aside) the concept of permanent formation that is filled with utilitarian and pharisaic concepts and to take ownership of a formation perspective that is really *permanent* and not only continues. Closely related to the first implication is a second: *to go out of* (to put aside) ineffective formation models and create an *integrative formation model* from the perspective of the Vincentian charism. This means moving beyond the situation in which we all see ourselves as experts in handing down a sentence on the formative practices that we know, like fans when they discuss a soccer game.

### **Permanent formation: the fundamental element**

We might give the impression that we are focused on the takeoff of a flight and that we have magically jumped to its point of arrival, because if the object of our study is vocational ministry, who would think of permanent formation as the first element? We gave an answer to that question on another occasion

*The twin of vocational ministry is ongoing formation and is more prominent today because the true vocational crisis today is not a matter that deals with those who are called but rather deals with those who do the calling. The immediate fruit of this process of ongoing formation (properly structured) is a sign of growth with regard to the quality of community life and a sensitivity of the confreres with regard to growth in their own vocation. Thus, ongoing formation becomes an element that*

*calls out to others, and even though it is not an element that is in a direct relationship with vocational promotion, nevertheless, it becomes such an element through witness, prayer, and joyful reaching out to others (this is also how Vincent de Paul understood this matter)<sup>119</sup>.*

Indeed, both were understood as disciplines that revolved around the priestly and religious crisis that occurred at the time of the Second Vatican Council, when it was seen that it was necessary to promote vocations that no longer appeared to be “a fit” for our ecclesial structures. At the same time, that scenario also brought into consciousness, through the massive departure of consecrated persons and moral scandals, that formation did not end with receiving the sacrament of Orders, for priests, or perpetual vows for consecrated life, but had to be extended for the length of one one’s life (and this was a primary demand if one wanted to keep one’s vocation alive).

But the relationship between one field and another was more clearly established in the first decade of this century. We can say, then, that vocational ministry and permanent formation are Siamese twins and are, therefore, condemned to walk together or to die separately.

*It may seem strange, but, on second thought, they do or should have same content, or the same model that should form a systematic project of vocational encouragement and permanent formation... Specifically: vocational encouragement is a sign and an instrument of renewal only if it is understood as a stimulus that*

<sup>119</sup> Rolando Gutiérrez, CM, “Toward a Vincentian Culture of Vocations” in *Vincentiana*, (62<sup>nd</sup> Year, July-September 2018, #3), 338-339.

*offers a precise content of permanent formation for all; the latter, in turn, becomes a sign and instrument of renewal if one is able to achieve a commitment in vocational encouragement from each and every member of the community. With such a formula we can express this reciprocal relationship of causality: "everyone forming themselves and all becoming agents of vocational animation"<sup>120</sup>.*

Furthermore, at this point in our journey, we can affirm that if the initial effort of a community, congregation, diocese or province is not directed towards permanent formation of its members, even though the best plan for Vocational Ministry has been developed and even though the leadership of this ministry is led by a team of people with the best qualities, in all probability, the vocational initiative will die to the rhythm of the fatigue of those directly responsible for this work. Another possibility is to be found in the reality that no one is involved in the same service forever and therefore, at best, the fruits will last as long as the members of this team are at the forefront of this endeavor. This ministry, however, will go to the grave with them at the time of their departure. Perhaps this work has just begun to flourish, but there comes a time when the results of this good harvest have to mingle and enter into the world of those who have not been trained in the same vocational perspective ... and lacking the presence of a well-formed team, the previous work is doomed to failure because permanent formation failed to create a new mentality, a new sensitivity and a new lifestyle.

<sup>120</sup> Amedeo Cencini, *De la Nostalgia a la Profecía* [From Nostalgia to Prophecy], Salamanca, 2007. P. 51-52.

Thus, we can see the need for a well-planned, structured and lived vocational culture. This is the fundamental element and we need to understand that *it is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but by attraction (Evangelii Gaudium, #14)* and that, as Vincentians, we cannot tire of repeating the words of our founder, *workers will multiply, attracted by the perfume of such charity (CCD:III:258)*.

In order to achieve this objective, we will reflect, in more profound manner, on four points.

1. How do we understand permanent formation?
2. Mistaken understanding of permanent formation
3. Relationship between permanent formation and initial formation
4. Resolutions with regard to permanent formation.

### **1. How do we understand permanent formation?**

The concern with regard to permanent formation has been highlighted in the Church's teaching and official documents. John Paul II, in *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1992), placed permanent formation in the context of personal fulfillment and maturity.

*There are also purely human reasons which call for the priest to engage in ongoing formation. This formation is demanded by his own continuing personal growth. Every life is a constant path toward maturity, a maturity which cannot be attained except by constant formation. It is also demanded by the priestly ministry seen in a general way and taken in*



*common with other professions, that is, as a service directed to others (Pastores Dabo Vobis, #70).*

At the same time, in 2002 the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life presented two important criteria: first, consecrated individuals were invited *to learn to be formed by everyday life, by their own community, by their brothers and sisters, by everyday things, ordinary and extraordinary, by prayer and by apostolic fatigue, in joy and in suffering, until the moment of death (Starting Afresh from Christ, #15);* second, they are also invited to create *well-planned programs for ongoing formation (Starting Afresh from Christ, #18).*

The concern for permanent formation seems to be well grounded in the Church, however, the depth, being and mission of permanent formation are not always understood. On more than a few occasions, lifelong learning is reduced to a functionalist concept, that is, formation for specific tasks that are in the interest of the person or the institution. Also, permanent formation is often simplified to a few annual events that begin and end in a few days. In other words, this permanent formation is viewed as a follow up on everything that was learned during the seminary years of formation, and not understood from the perspective of everyday life, of our Vincentian identity and not understood as touching every dimension of our life, that is, personal, community, apostolic, spiritual and academic.

What do we understand by permanent formation in relation to a vocational culture? It will be necessary to build a concept composed of various elements: beginning with a definition of its mission.

## 2. Mistaken understanding of permanent formation

In consecrated life there is a fairly general misunderstanding: permanent formation is often understood as something that enables us to remain up-to-date, that is, we have a certain understanding that this task is to avoid becoming “stale” so that we can continue to fulfill our mission in this world of constant change. When this happens, permanent formation is reduced to a few workshops (with a specific duration), or, at most, some longer formation periods that revolve around theological or pastoral developments. To put aside this reductionist concept, it is necessary to be vigilant with regard to the *pharisaic complex* into which we can quite easily fall.

The Synoptic Gospels are filled with accounts of miraculous healings in which Jesus revealed the Kingdom of God. Simple people, like the poor and the sick, have an easier time discovering the salvation that transforms their lives. To cite one of many examples, the woman with hemorrhages reminds us of the conversion and vitality that arises from an encounter with Christ. Jesus spoke to this woman and said: *Daughter, your faith has saved you. Go in peace and be cured of your affliction* (Mark 5:34). For that woman, the person of Jesus meant a new way of understanding the world (*attitude*), her external and internal senses were healed through contact with Jesus (*sensitivity*) and more specifically, Mark tells us that Jesus gave a new lifestyle to this woman (*pedagogy*) who, in the eyes of the people, seemed to be a most unfortunate woman.

At the opposite extreme is the group of Pharisees, who did not distance themselves from the Lord; in fact, *the Pharisees with some scribes who had come from Jerusalem, gathered*

*around Jesus* (Mark 7:1) but their heart and mind were not capable of being transformed by the Messiah whom they had long awaited. They could not even recognize Jesus as such, and although they could recite to Jesus the law and the prophets from memory, nevertheless, they *watched him closely to see if he would cure the man with the withered hand on the sabbath so that they might accuse him* (Mark 3:3). Furthermore, *the Pharisees took counsel with the Herodians against him to put him to death* (Mark 3:5).

There was a permanent conflict between the Pharisees and Jesus: the Lord's novel proposal was foreign to their formation<sup>121</sup>, and being sure of their role as teachers for the people, it was unacceptable that a Nazarene should attempt to make them his disciples.

The Pharisees were convinced that they were teachers and as a result their character was incompatible with the discipleship of those who chose to follow Jesus. They no longer allowed themselves to be formed, rather they felt that they were in a position to form others, and any attempt to contradict their position would be dealt with in the same way that they dealt with Jesus.

When permanent formation is viewed only as updating those who have already completed their formation process, it is very easy to take on the position of the Pharisees: believing themselves already formed to form others, (mature trees that bear fruit and survive with the minimum of water and sun and no longer require fertilizer). In those situations, formation becomes an accessory that simply continues to give solidity to knowledge that has already been acquired. Then, although the

<sup>121</sup> *What is this? A new teaching with authority. He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him* (Mark 1:27).





opposite is often proclaimed, there is only one step left to stop feeling like disciples and assume the role of teachers. Nevertheless, the statistics and scandals have turned that position upside down and tell us that initial formation is not really enough.

### **3. Relationship between permanent and initial formation**

Ideally, permanent formation is not about what comes next, but rather, about what comes before, that is, *initial formation can only be derived or deduced from the concept of permanent formation and not the opposite*. This supposes a new conversion of perspective, a new Copernican twist in our understanding. When we talk about formation, we should primarily understand this as permanent formation, and only secondarily as the initial formation that occurs in seminaries or houses of formation.

If we begin from the stages of the formation process as presented in our *Ratio Formationis* (Chapter I, section 3.A) then, permanent formation, the fifth stage, when compared to initial formation which on the average does not exceed ten years, will occupy a greater part of our lives.

It would be quite erroneous to suppose that a seminary can, by itself, sustain the life and vocation of any person, even when the best training strategies have been offered and the most competent formators are available.

Therefore, permanent formation does not refer to pastoral updating, but rather to the constant revitalization of the whole person. It is not essentially a temporal concept that is to be viewed from the perspective of the years following the



seminary; rather, it is a psychological-spiritual concept that places the person in a formative attitude throughout life. Above all, permanent formation is *a progressive path that becomes increasingly evident in the purification of motivations, the path along which fidelity and integrity are translated into everyday choices*<sup>122</sup>. It is, therefore, in permanent formation, where the mysticism of the Vincentian charism must be prioritized more strongly, not reduced to a few sporadic readings, but developed in a plan that encompasses the totality of those who have been called to the work of mission-charity. Indeed, these individuals have a constant need for conversion, a need to learn how to live their vocation with greater fidelity and, therefore, to learn how to be happier in their vocation.

This vision demands that we *go out* and put aside our view of formation as something typical of seminarians or novices and it also forces us to suppress the unconscious idea that we are *formed* because, in fact, we are never totally formed. On the contrary, if throughout life we do not move forward, then we will find ourselves moving backward. In this regard, Cencini's words are very valid:

*Either permanent formation or permanent deformation... if life is not permanent formation then, it is a permanent frustration*<sup>123</sup>.

Thus, we come to understand, as is typical of the charism of Saint Vincent, that the fidelity to which we have been called is not so much a permanent state, but a constant reinventing of oneself. It is a demand for that creativity which allows us to

<sup>122</sup> Amedeo Cencini, *¿Creremos de verdad en la Formación Permanente?* [Do we truly believe in permanent formation?] Kindle edition.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*



live our vocation in times of joy and in times of suffering, in times of pastoral productivity or when a pandemic is experienced, in times of health and in times of infirmity, in the midst of a healthy community environment and also in the midst of a community in crisis (a crisis that one has not caused). In a word, permanent formation seeks to create people who are joyful as they live their vocation in a faithful manner ... and that is not something that is simply preserved, rather it demands continued inventiveness and constant renewal.

*Perfection consists in a constant perseverance to acquire the virtues and become proficient in their practice, because, on God's road, not to advance is to fall back since individuals never remain in the same condition (CCD:II:146).*

However, an inevitable question remains: if permanent formation is concerned about the entire process of conversion and the purification of motivations, then what is the role of seminaries and initial training? Is that just a very limited preparatory task?

*Initial formation - as is the case of a seminary, a house of formation or an apostolic group - is the "debut" of the vocation with all its demands and in all its authenticity. Ongoing formation, during every stage of life, will delve into those same convictions and motivations, so that they are translated into appropriate decisions. The basic guidelines are the same for both moments of training - initial and ongoing. This formation is eminently vocational, inserted in a dynamism of continuous renewal, always with the theological perspective of thinking,*





*feeling and loving like Christ - faith, hope and charity*<sup>124</sup>.

We are not downplaying initial formation. Quite the contrary, seminaries and formators play a crucial role in the overall formation process. In fact, with the understanding of Cencini's well-known proposal, we could say that it is one of the most important functions since the formation of individuals in *docilitas* is a primary requirement in making permanent formation possible: *the main objective of initial formation will be exactly to form in the person the "docibilitas" which, as has already been indicated, is the fundamental intrapsychic and spiritual condition of permanent formation*<sup>125</sup>.

Amedeo distinguishes between the person who is simply docile (*docilitas*) and those who have developed the necessary intelligence to allow themselves to be formed for life (*docibilitas*) as would be expected in order to create a vocational culture.

*"Docilitas" refers to docile persons, those who, at least apparently, are free to adhere to a will different from theirs ... are never stubborn and obstinate in their position; persons who collaborates with equals and are obedient to authority. Docile persons do not put up with moments of confusion and anarchy, nor do they like to be left alone to*

<sup>124</sup> Juan Esquerda Bifet, *La Misión al estilo de los Apóstles. Itinerario de Formación Inicial y Permanente* [Mission in the style of the Apostles: Initial and permanent formation processes], Madrid, 2004, p. 242.

<sup>125</sup> Amedeo Cencini, *¿Creemos de verdad en la Formación Permanente?* [Do we truly believe in on-going formation], Kindle edition.





*make decisions or invent something... Normally docility is considered a virtue that is practiced in the presence of precise orders... it is even considered by many as the arrival point of a certain formation process.*

*“Docibilitas” is a boldness of the spirit or a high form of intelligence, perhaps the highest, typical of those who do not wait for the orders from above, but take the initiative to analyze reality for its formative dimension and opportunity, of which reality is always full. They are intelligent enough, therefore, to realize how much grace is around them, and free in a corresponding measure, so as to allow themselves to be formed by that reality. They are wise individuals and acquire more and more the biblical gift and virtue of wisdom<sup>126</sup>.*

Thus, in well-developed formation plans, the first element that must be attended to is the life of the missionaries or the sisters, in fidelity to the charism and in light of the signs of the times. From there permanent formation arises, whose contents and itineraries will be on a par with those of the vocational ministers, but artistically adapted to this other reality. Finally, and only in the last position, is it time to reflect on initial formation, which has as its the mission the task of offering space and tools for people to integrate their lives. Here we are speaking about those individuals who are wise and capable of embracing a path that will be laid out by a formative experience that they accept with joy and a sense of need. Thus,

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<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*





we are all walking in the same direction of discipleship, some in a more forward positions than others, but all being led by only one teacher, the Evangelizer of the poor.

#### 4. Resolutions with regard to permanent formation

We ought to come to a clear understanding of permanent formation. Since the publication of *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, we could say that it is *falling more in love with Christ every day* (#82)<sup>127</sup>. Amedeo Cencini, with a more psychological approach, defined permanent formation as the real “I” in search of the ideal “I”.

*The inner awareness of the difference between ideal and reality is what makes life a constant journey of formation, and at the same time, only those who take travel along such a path (permanent formation) in a serious manner will be able to realize that difference and make the necessary decisions*<sup>128</sup>.

The *Ratio Formationis* of the Congregation of the Mission defines permanent formation in the following manner:

*Ongoing formation refers to the system of relationships and programs which assist adult confreres humanly, spiritually, intellectually, apostolically and communally — fostering among them Vincentian perspectives, ideals,*

<sup>127</sup> The exact translation is the following: *deepen their love for Christ, the Good Shepherd*.

<sup>128</sup> Amedeo Cencini, *La Hora de Dios. La Crisis en la Vida del Creyente* [The hour of God. The Crisis in the Life of the Believer], Bogota, p. 55.

*patterns of living and way to advance in  
communion with the Lord* (Chapter 8, Section  
1.A).

The concept is certainly quite generic, but throughout the document we see that the proposal is in harmony with the perspective we offer.

Finally, two methodological aspects must be pointed out: first, in order that formation might be truly permanent, it cannot be limited to meetings that are held two or three times a year, but, thanks to the concept of *docibilitas* it has to be lived on a daily basis. That is why the local community has a very important role in the lives of the missionaries and the sisters because it is there that formation spaces are sought and it is also there that resources are provided that create an environment conducive to formation or also very suitable for “de-formation”.

Secondly, it is necessary to take permanent formation seriously so that well-developed plans and methods adapted for each stage of life can be established. Thus, the content of such formation is not the same for the elderly as for those who are in the first five or ten years of their missionary life, nor could the strategies be the same for those who live in times of calmness and those who are in a moment of difficulty and therefore, require special support.

The need to create permanent formation plans does not contradict but rather supposes that the raw material of any formation process is the human person who must be convinced of this need (a *docile* person). Therefore, the good fruit of congregational plans in this area will always be dependent on that reality. It is, however, no less true that if permanent formation is not well-planned, then the issue is resolved by



saying that *that formation is everyone's business* but in reality, it ends up being *nobody's business*.

### **An integral formation model from the perspective of the Vincentian charism<sup>129</sup>**

Consciously or unconsciously, each one of us has a formation model which becomes evident when we are entrusted with the ministry of initial formation because it is at that time that we attempt to implement the criteria that we have adopted. In reality, however, it is possible to identify the model that each person uses through some specific indicators: interests, needs and elements which one is sensitive about. Based on these criteria, we can determine one's affinity to the various formation models that Amedeo Cencini presents in his classical work, *El Árbol de la Vida* [The Tree of Life]<sup>130</sup>.

First, however, we must clarify that we are not dealing with a problem of models or structures per se; rather we are presented with a great challenge before which the entire formation process, initial and permanent, must respond, namely, the challenge of personal integration from the perspective of the Vincentian vocation.

It is not enough to list a series of psychological tools or the clinical treatment given to a patient, because neither seminaries nor the Congregation is a hospital to heal the sick. We need a

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<sup>129</sup> This section is based on a presentation that was given at the First Meeting of Vocation Directors of the Congregation of the Mission, Rolando Gutiérrez, CM, "Vincentian Vocation Culture" in *Vincentiana* (63<sup>rd</sup> Year, January-March 2019, #1), p. 112-122.

<sup>130</sup> Amedeo Cecini, *El Árbol de la Vida: Hacia un modelo de formación inicial y permanente* [The Tree of Life: Toward a model of initial and permanent formation], Bogotá, 2012.





model able to embody every dimension of a person's life in which coherence struggles against incoherence, the happiness of a missionary (or future missionary) struggles against frustration and missionary zeal struggles against mediocrity.

The challenge is to search for an Integrated Vincentian Formation Model (IVFM) which encompasses the whole person in a vocational project in which the person has consecrated his life or in which he has begun a process of initial formation. In accord with the present reality, we are dealing with *focusing growth on formation in sensitivity, on the interior world of the person, formation that, in a very concrete manner, begins with attention to one's feelings (internal and external)*<sup>131</sup>.

This means that those who have been called to the Vincentian vocation are people who are totally aware of their *feelings* and those feelings create *habits* and the habits form *needs* in the unconsciousness of the individual and the needs that do not correspond to the truth of the life project (incoherence) seek gratification that often leads to anguish, anxiety, and frustration. Therefore, the lack of an integrated Vincentian formation model leads to the pandemic of mediocrity, creates missionaries or sisters with certain vocational inconsistencies that can become problems in the area of stability. As a result, we have consecrated individuals who are incapable of calling others and terminate in a never-ending circle of a vocational anti-culture.

Therefore, because *grace supposes nature*, individuals who have been called to spend their whole life evangelizing the poor in the Vincentian Family need to experience a process of

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<sup>131</sup> Amedeo Cecini, *Abrazar el Futuro con Esperanza* [Embrace the Future with Hope], Cantabria, 2018, Kindle Edition.





permanent conversion and purification of their deepest motivations. This change of attitude, sensitivity and lifestyle can be sought through three different mechanisms: *satisfaction, identification or internalization* ... in our model, we opt for the last of these.

*Satisfaction is only a matter of external conformity in which the person accepts external influence, hoping to receive some reward or avoid punishment. This is about accepting some value as a result of complacency or some pleasure<sup>132</sup>.*

*Identification refers to the acquisition of an attitude that is learned by observing. For example, a young person identifies with a famous athlete and acquires his way of viewing certain things. Thus, this young person not only conforms, but is subjectively convinced, even though his conviction depends on a external source<sup>133</sup>.*

*Internalization takes place when a new attitude is adopted because it is consistent with one's value system. Here external reinforcements do not have much weight nor do external sources. Rather, the person is convinced, for internal reasons, of the importance of the content in itself.*

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<sup>132</sup> The mechanism of satisfaction can easily create power relationships in houses of formation and this becomes fertile ground for every form of abuse.

<sup>133</sup> With identification one fails to understand that *time is greater than space* and runs the risk of offering great joy in the present moment (with a supposed vocational identity that is observed in those being formed) and thus creating future problems in the area of stability.



*Internalization not only includes harmony with a personal value system, but also admits the objective reality of those values<sup>134</sup>.*

The formation model that are unable to integrate the life of those who feel called to a specific vocation are those that are grounded on strategies designed for *satisfaction and identification*. Amedeo Cencini calles these models, *models lacking an integration capacity<sup>135</sup>*.

**Table 6: Models unable to bring about integration**

| Model  | Objective   | Modality   | Positive Aspects  | Doubtful Aspects   |
|--|---|--|---|--|
| <b>PERFECTION</b>                                | Personal achievement of sanctity-perfection.      | Elimination of everything opposed to perfection.             | Clarity of method and purpose. A certain rigidity.                    | Goal is not very realistic, risk of psychological impoverishment; individualism. |
| <b>COMMON OBSERVANCE</b>                         | Perfection of the group.                          | Uniformity in behavior.                                      | Unambiguous messages and social reinforcement.                        | Conformity and too formalistic.  |
| <b>SELF-FULFILLMENT</b>                          | Self-esteem and self-affirmation.                 | Action in accord with one's gifts and personal qualities.    | Sense of uniqueness and self-worth.                                   | Narcissism leading to frustration and depression.                                |
| <b>SELF-ACCEPTANCE</b>                           | Acceptance of one's integral reality.             | Self-knowledge without pretending to eliminate the negative. | Lessening of tension and acceptance of one's limitations.             | General mediocrity with no motivation to change.                                 |
| <b>A SINGLE COMPONENT MODEL (No integration)</b> | Focuses on what is considered as essential-vital. | Pointing out a single way.                                   | Consistency and focus, not straying beyond the established framework. | Subjective – biased – unilateral visión.   |

<sup>134</sup> José Rafael Prada, *Psicología y Formación* [Psychology and Formation], p. 242.

<sup>135</sup> Here we follow in a literal manner Amedeo Cecini, *El Árbol de la Vida. Hacia un modelo de formación inicial y permanente* [The Tree of Life: Toward a model of initial and permanent formation], Bogotá, 2012, p.147.

Cencini highlights the positive contributions of these five models and attempts to overcome their deficiencies by proposing an integration model that, in tune with the vocational culture and the Vincentian charism, offers us *a formation journey that is able to influence the heart and sensitivity in such a manner that they become more and more to resemble the heart and sensitivity of the Son, the Servant, the Lamb of the Evangelizer of the poor.*

Cencini's model does not neglect the personal or community search for holiness and takes into consideration the importance of elements such as self-acceptance and the strengthening of a healthy self-esteem. Furthermore, his model does not allow for the exaltation of only one of the aspects of Vincentian identity, but rather he goes about finding a formation model that focuses the whole life of a person around Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor. This model also takes into account the strengths and wounds of the individual so that these also become integrated into the mysticism, the mission and community that is proper to the children of Saint Vincent.

None of this is possible without profound work on the human dimension of the person, where integration-personal healing is sought. Likewise, it is not achieved without an authentic experience of faith, which in a postmodern culture involves individuals in a *vocational kerygma* and requires clarity with regard to motivation. This also means that there are well-defined itineraries for each of the dimensions of formation: human, spiritual, community, apostolic, intellectual and that these dimensions are developed from the perspective of the Vincentian charism to which we have been called<sup>136</sup>.

<sup>136</sup> *The Vincentian charism can be thought of as an "axis" which supports the five dimensions of formation, much as an axle supports five spokes of a wheel. Just as physical energy flows from an axle through the spokes of a wheel*



Only in this way will we achieve a new attitude, a new sensitivity and a new personal and community lifestyle, that is, a Vincentian Vocational Culture.

Cencini frames his integrative formation model in the following terms:

**Table 7: Formative model of integration**

| Model              | Objective                                   | Modality                                | Positive Aspects  | Doubtful Aspects                                  |
|--------------------|---|---|---|---|
| <b>INTEGRATION</b> | Viewing life from perspective of the cross. | Acceptance, in faith, of one's reality. | Personal integrity and transformation of negative elements. | Effort to integrate certain wounds from the past. |

We find in this model an objective that highlights the root of the Vincentian charism problem. This model encompasses the difficulties surrounding the vow of stability and offers adequate tools to accompany new generations, who, in the midst of the crisis of meaninglessness that overwhelms them, have an urgent need to integrate their life around one *center* that is able to give meaning to their existence. In our case, the center is none other than Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor.

The modality, *acceptance, in faith, of one's reality*, places us in harmony with the process of conversion of our founder and the charismatic proposal of the Vincentian Family. That proposal is part of *vocational kerygma* which we proclaim through mission and charity. That proposal, from the time of initial formation to the end of one's life, points out the need to *internalize* the mysticism, the mission and the community style of the Vincentian charism ... and to do this from a perspective of radicalness that encompasses the whole person.

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*leading to action, so the Vincentian charism provides energy for an individual's development in the five dimensions of formation (Ratio Formationis, Chapter 1, section 1.D).*

We are not speaking about a therapeutic process, but rather an integral Vincentian Formation Model grounded on biblical and Christological concepts and, therefore, authentically Christian in its inspiration. Vincentians are to be *believers and*, from the integrity of their charism, *to become ever more grounded in their faith* (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, #73). They are to utilize the tools of psychology and the human sciences in order to evangelize the sensitivity of each person, because it is there where the deepest motivations are found that people become happy in their missionary option. Unfortunately, we also know that individuals can separate their Vincentian vocation on the one hand from their personal projects on the other, which can lead to that chain that we know as frustration – mediocrity – lack of integrity – instability – abuse – scandal.

Obviously, the objective to which we aspire is impossible to achieve in the course of one decade of our life (initial formation). Therefore, we must begin an upward spiraling process that begins from the *vocational kerygma* and concludes with our going forth to participate in the heavenly mission. We can say, then, that we are standing before a model that requires a culture of permanent formation.

We must also take into consideration the doubtful aspects of this Vincentian integration formation model. Therefore, let us reflect on two aspects:

1. It would be necessary to begin by forming appropriate personnel to accompany a proposal of this magnitude because this is clearly not an area in which we have been formed. The lack of specialists gives rise to a culture of improvisation in which well-intentioned individuals take on the responsibility for leading processes for which they have no competency (*Quod*

*natura non dat, salmantica non praestat*). Requirements: specialization in the area of formation and a passion for this ministry. The missionary experience can enrich the suitability of a formator, but it is not sufficient and is not, therefore, the first element that should be considered.

2. *Often what is important takes precedence over which is urgent*<sup>137</sup> and it may happen that in a congregational structure, one falls into the temptation to put out the fire that is burning with regard to personnel for various works. Thus, formation is offered to the extent that it does not require too much investment of resources and personnel (we sing the never-ending song: *we do not have enough personnel*). When vocations are not prioritized, *ecclesial sclerosis* begins to do its thing when the first unsuccessful attempts occur. We then condemn the formation model, like the one we presented, because it seems to be an ideal ... here a prophetic vision is necessary.

**Table 8: Integral Vincentian Formation Model (IVFN)**

| Model | Objective   | Modality   | Positive aspects  | Doubtful aspects  |
|-------|---|--|---|---|
| IVFM  | Configuration with Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor. | Acceptance of a real Vincentian context as one engages in the search for a mysticism of mission and community with a clear identity. | Integration from the Vincentian axis of the five dimensions of formation.<br><br>Mindful of inconsistencies that can become dangers with regard to stability. | Do we have trained personnel?<br><br><i>Often what is important takes precedence over what is urgent.</i> |

In conclusion, the first step for a Vincentian vocational culture is *go out from* (to put aside) our reductive concepts of formation and adopt a permanent formation process that

<sup>137</sup> II Latin American Congress on Vocations, 2011.



revitalizes our mysticism, mission and community, a formation that leads us to follow Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor ... and to follow with *radicalness* and in a *prophetic* manner. For this, it is also necessary to *go out from* (to put aside) formation models that do not achieve the *internalization* of the Vincentian identity in individuals. This departure has as its arrival point in *rejuvenating* proposal that we have referred to as an Integral Vincentian Formation Model. To achieve this, we must *go out from* (put aside) a culture of improvisation and take up a model that does not promise immediate results but does require us to be convinced that *time is greater than space*.







## **Chapter VII:**

### **WITH THE GAZE OF CHRIST AND SAINT VINCENT (TO SEE)**

*Jesus is walking in our midst, as he did in Galilee. He walks through our streets, and he quietly stops and looks into our eyes. His call is attractive and intriguing. Yet today the stress and quick pace of a world constantly bombarding us with stimuli can leave no room for that interior silence in which we can perceive Jesus' gaze and hear his call (Christus Vivit, #277)*

Through seeing and listening, Christ proclaims the Gospel of vocation. That is what has led us *to go out of* (to put aside) our non-prophetic or non-radical customs in order *to see*, and we could well add, in order *to listen to* the intriguing call to follow Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor. Yes, we have been led into the midst of new scenarios that also require us to refresh our interpretive ability in order to know how to accompany those to whom the vocational proclamation is addressed.

#### **To interpret the new vocational situations**

The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us a missionary lesson: the essential was never to be found in the number of activities carried out nor is the quality of our service to be



found in the number of people we gather together. We are not involved in competition to discover who can burn the most “pastoral calories”. We had to become missionaries with empty churches and as a result, confinement forced us to share more time in community. There were no longer excuses to justify our absence from community prayer. Suddenly, our pastoral wings, with which we were accustomed to fly, were cut off and we realized that the virus of haste and anxiety is not only a reality of new generations, but is also a reality of the children of a globalized world, a reality of missionaries, Daughters of Charity, consecrated individuals. Perhaps we had given priority to the work of our hands over such an extended period of time that our eyes and ears fell asleep.

In these pages we have not said anything new about the reality of young men and women. Yet, in all likelihood, we have become involved in so many missionary tasks that we seldom stop to let Christ gaze at us and rejuvenate our Vincentian call. Perhaps the hurried movement from one place to another does not provide us with the patience that is required to invite some young hearts to join with us in a contemplative silence, where Christ seduces with his gaze and extends the invitation to follow him in the work of evangelizing the poor.

That gaze is required in order *to turn the medal* (CCD: XI:26) and at the same time, that gaze allows us to carefully observe the new vocational situations, and interpret, with prophetic eyes, the task that we must undertake.

*In some young people, we can see a desire for God, albeit still vague and far from knowledge of the God of revelation. In others, we can glimpse an ideal of human fraternity, which is no small thing. Many have a genuine desire to*





*develop their talents in order to offer something to our world. In some, we see a special artistic sensitivity, or a yearning for harmony with nature. In others, perhaps, a great need to communicate. In many of them, we encounter a deep desire to live life differently. In all of this, we can find real starting points, inner resources open to a word of incentive, wisdom and encouragement (Christus Vivit, #84).*

As we saw in the first chapter, in the emptiness caused by the meaninglessness of life that the materialistic-hedonist culture does not know how to fill, there is a latent human desire for transcendence, an unidentified desire for God that is manifested through pseudo-religious devotions and practices. Likewise, in the incredible sensitivity of young people with regard to experiences that reflect an authentic sense of community, we can identify a deep desire to find a focus that gives meaning to their existence and channels their desire to contribute something to humanity.

To interpret in this way what at first glance appears to be total indifference requires a gaze like that of Jesus with the fishermen or like that of Vincent de Paul with the dying man in Folleville ... a gaze to see *beyond*, to see the place where the *vocational mystery* is revealed.

In this way, as difficult as the vocational situation may seem, there is always the hope of miraculous fishing on the part of those who dare *to go out* of their sclerotic structures and are able *to gaze* at the new realities in a prophetic manner.

*Jesus called people who were not in the Temple, that is, who were not among the group of worshippers; rather, like Matthew*



*and Judas, he chose sinners as his disciples, sinners from among a people of sinners and sent them forth not to the righteous, but to sinners<sup>138</sup>.*

We need the gaze of Christ that is able to awaken the senses of those who seemed insensitive to the voice of God. Above all, in the age of the sensory, we need to be able to make our language understood in the new pastoral situations<sup>139</sup>. This is not achieved simply by moving from traditional meetings to a presence on the various social media networks. The language, which the new reality demands of us, is one that has the ability to enter through the window of the eyes and penetrate the depths of the heart. It is a language that knows how to offer a radical path through a mission lived from a mystical perspective and through the service of charity exercised in community which in turn, becomes a source of joy for the soul. This is the language of sensitivity, one that evangelizes not only concepts but also offers personal integrity and, therefore, is one that proclaims the Gospel of vocation.

None of this is magically achieved but requires the patience to carry out the appropriate processes. Therefore, no effort should be spared in accompanying those who are in search of meaning for their lives because it is there that the call to follow Jesus Christ may arise, that is, the service that corresponds to vocational ministry.

<sup>138</sup> Amedeo Cencini, *Nuevas Realidades en Materia Vocacional* [New Realities in Vocational Matters], presentation at the International Congress on Vocational Ministry (Rome, October 2016).

<sup>139</sup> *A positive conception of emotions and feelings, and therefore of the affective life, does not mean that they are always useful, but it does affirm that the best recipe for success is not reason alone, but a mixture of reason and emotion; cf. José Rafael Prada, Psicología y Formación* [Psychology and Formation], p. 166.

### **To know how to accompany**

The need for accompaniment was expressly pointed out by young men and women in the context of the Synod: *In many ways, the young ask us to describe the qualities needed in an accompanier. The service of accompaniment is a genuine mission, which requires apostolic availability on the part of those who provide it* (Final Document of 2018 Synod, #101).

The service of accompaniment has an indispensable place in the establishment of a vocational culture. It is the place of encounter between the Church and young people, not simply in terms of a vocational choice, but also as a ministry that is embodied in the youthful reality to awaken, from within, the human sensitivity toward good, beauty, unity and truth.

*Accompaniment for the sake of valid, stable and well-founded choices, is therefore a service that is widely needed. Being present, supporting and accompanying the journey towards authentic choices is one way for the Church to exercise her maternal function, giving birth to the freedom of the children of God. Service of this kind is simply the continuation of the way in which the God of Jesus Christ acts towards his people: through constant and heartfelt presence, dedicated and loving closeness and tenderness without limits* (Final Document of 2018 Synod, #91)

The Vincentian mission is oriented towards the evangelization of the poor and the formation of the clergy, and therefore we are not called to dedicate ourselves exclusively to the accompaniment of youth. Nevertheless, it is clear that,



within the framework of the New Evangelization, to make charity effective on behalf of those most in need, indirect services are required ... services that are oriented to our proper mission. Such is the case of the Superior General, the General Assistants, or those who are dedicated to provincial administration. Also, from the perspective of the formation mission, which calls us *to go out of* [to put aside] our reductionist concepts, one can no longer think exclusively of the structure of the houses of formation. As we have already stated, one begins with permanent formation, which simultaneously encompasses vocational ministry, and concludes with the seminary ministry.

The ministry of accompanying young people, as understood here, is in accord with that which is expressed in the *Ratio Formationis* and uses the phrases *initial invitation*<sup>140</sup> and *active discernment*<sup>141</sup>. Structurally, we are talking about accompaniment from the perspective of our works and ministries and through the youth groups of the Vincentian Family or through creating places and spaces where it seems that there are no young men and women. This refers to an interest in approaching young people, directly or indirectly, through teachers, animators, coaches, or those who collaborate with us in the work of evangelization.

It is evident that there is a large area in the educational centers that have been entrusted to our congregations, above

<sup>140</sup> *Vocation ministers invite youth to learn about and share in Christ's mission. In doing so, some of the young persons may begin inquiring about Vincentian life (Ratio Formationis, Chapter 2, Section 1.C.*

<sup>141</sup> *Persons at this phase seek human and Christian growth with some openness to a vocation within a society of apostolic life. Vocation ministers provide inquirers with the information and witness they need to understand the Vincentian vocation, and assist them in discernment (Ratio Formationis, Chapter 2, Section 1.C.*





all, the Daughters of Charity who have a significant number of schools. Here the link between Vocational Ministry, educational ministry, family ministry and youth ministry is born. The development of these last two (family and youth ministry) have great possibilities in parishes and in the area of popular missions.

Technically, we are talking about the service of vocational animation, whose mission it is to make the category *vocation* a part of every aspect of the life of the Church, or better, to create a vocational culture so that all pastoral activity is directed toward planting seeds in children, youth, adults, families, schools, youth groups, associations ... in every possible pastoral setting. This is accompaniment with a view to sensitizing Christians to the first and most important vocation: *the universal call to holiness* should be contextualized *in a practical way for our own time, with all its risks, challenges, and opportunities. For the Lord has chosen each one of us "to be holy and blameless before him in love"* [Ephesians 1:4] (*Gaudete et Exsultate*, #2).

The service of accompaniment is the opposite of formation and yet so often formation programs for young men and women are often confused with accompaniment. Young men and women, like all Christians, should be offered formation programs that include all dimensions for their Christian maturation and vocational development. The options for a vocation of special consecration are almost always the mature fruit of a healthy process of accompaniment, which requires our time, resources and effort.

Alongside group or community accompaniment, there is an urgent demand that young people expressed at the synod, namely, a demand for spiritual-personal accompaniment. This



ministry consists of being pedagogues of the discernment for young people. This is more an art than a science and while it has some psychological elements, it is not therapy. It is certainly an element in the spiritual arena but cannot be separated from the reality of the subject. We could say that this is about accompanying a person in the development of an artistic ability to interweave life with the call of God and the free response to that call which leads to vocational maturity.

The Synod emphasized that *never has there been so great a need as there is today for spiritual guides, fathers and mothers with profound experience of faith and humanity, over and above their intellectual preparation* (Final Document of 2018 Synod, #97). This reveals the need to invest personnel in this area and to provide them with the necessary competence. The fact that one is dedicated to the mission and charity does not automatically give one competency in this area.

Pope Francis identifies three *sensitivities* that are necessary requirements for those individuals who are involved in the service of accompanying young men and women:

1. Sensitivity to the person: this is about listening and *about making others feel that our time is their time ... the other person must sense that we are listening unconditionally* (*Christus Vivit*, #292).
2. Sensitivity to those discerning: *to discern the salutary promptings of the good Spirit who proposes to us the Lord's truth, but also the traps laid by the evil spirit – his empty works and promises. It takes courage, warmth and tact to help others distinguish the truth from illusions or excuses* (*Christus Vivit*, #293).





3. Sensitivity to perceive what is driving the other: *This calls for a deeper kind of listening, one able to discern the direction in which that person truly wants to move. Apart from what they are feeling or thinking right now, and whatever has happened up to this point in their lives, the real issue is what they would like to be. This may demand that they look not to their own superficial wishes and desires, but rather to what is most pleasing to the Lord, to his plans for their life. And that is seen in a deeper inclination of the heart, beyond the surface level of their likes and feelings (Christus Vivit, #294).*

This last point of personal discernment opens the door for an invitation to the Vincentian vocation that should never lose its power. If this is done with a radical testimony of clothing oneself in the spirit of Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor, it will surely “open” the eyes of young people as they move forward in their process of discernment. All this means being practitioners of good patience, remembering that *time is greater than space* and that, therefore, we must apply the pedagogy of our founder.

*Our mind is like a little vase with a very narrow opening; when water is poured into it little by little in small trickles it goes in without loss and the vase fills up, but when we pour it quickly and abundantly, very little goes in — or, rather, nothing goes in (CCD:XI:136).*

We must never lose sight of the fact that we are involved in the service of accompanying consciences, not replacing them; therefore, the relationship between companion and accompanied must always reflect the same harmony that exists between the freedom of God’s calling and the freedom of the



individual being called. Consciences are sacred, and demand that we remove our sandals and at the same time put aside our hurried activity, our proselytizing anguish and self-interest.

To have well-trained companions, able *to see and to hear* like Christ and Vincent de Paul, reflects the existence of good permanent formation process in the consecrated persons of a congregation, and at the same time reflects the necessary relationship between permanent formation and vocational ministry.





## Chapter VIII:

### CHALLENGE OTHERS TO FOLLOW JESUS CHRIST IN CHARITY-MISSION (TO CALL)

To describe the first pedagogical step for the creation of a vocational culture from the perspective of the Vincentian charism, we have used the verb, *to go out*. It is the starting point of lifelong learning and an integral-Vincentian concept of a formation model that invites us *to go out of* [to put aside] some customary practices that keep us sclerotic.

*To see* is the action with which we identify the second section of the scaffolding with regard to vocational construction. It refers to the attitude of Christ who stopped to observe people's lives with his transformational gaze, listened and accompanied the disciples on the road to Emmaus to change their discouragement (through a process of profound discernment) and to lead them to a passionate life of proclaiming the Risen One (Cf. Luke 24:13-35).

Finally, our third pedagogical step is the action, *to call*. A vocational culture imprints a prophetic character on vocations of special consecration and makes them challenging for new generations when lived with radicalness. This, however, does not happen automatically. It is necessary to make known the happiness of living a life focused on following Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor, and also to make known the passion of the mission and the service of charity, as well as the beauty of community life. We must put aside timidity and be able to

present our activity to young people, but always mindful of Vincent's warning: *doing good is not enough; we have to do it well, after the example of Our Lord* (CCD:XII:148).

### **Plans more than activities**

For a musical composer, the success of a symphony lies in the artistic ability to balance the different parts of the whole and thus, the harmony that is generated by the correct proportions is what enables the musical piece to embody a beauty that touches the soul and enchants and captivates the listener.

Vocation is also a call to beauty, which impacts the human response when it touches the depths of men and women and unleashes in them a passionate search for good, truth and unity. Such a challenge cannot be developed from a well-intentioned list of activities that point in various directions, as if everyone were singing in a different musical key.

Trust in Divine Providence cannot be interpreted as being opposed to human responsibility. Indeed, in the area of vocational ministry, the voice of the Eternal caller, harmonious and beautiful, is embodied in the structures that we represent, and therefore, it is imperative that well-developed plans be established, under the Ignatian principle that was embodied in the thinking of Vincent de Paul:

*I approve of the maxim that all licit and possible means should be used for the glory of God, as if God were not supposed to help us, provided we expect everything from his divine providence, as though we had no human means* (CCD:IV:362).



Admittedly, today in some places, there is a certain allergy to the word *projects* because immediately one has the image of numberless meetings, unnecessary documentation and time invested in plans that never go beyond the paper on which they are written. Elsewhere, especially when congregational structures are complex, it can be difficult to coordinate initiatives due to the disparity of criteria, and so, vocational projects often terminate with some general guidelines for formation and some good advice for vocational promotion. Formators and vocational promoters have often not been provided with a specific formation model, and as a result we have the situation in which, as the refrain goes, *everyone has his/her own way of doing things*.

Vocational ministry is often viewed as calming consciences when it has not been planned correctly, that is, when it becomes a never ending emergency and when each person appointed to that ministry is expected to be “the messiah” who resolves a problem that has, however, been structurally neglected.

Therefore, today more than ever, vocational ministry should be viewed as a process and not so much as a series of more or less well-organized activities. There needs to be clarity with regard to the pedagogical proposals, the stages and the purposes that emerge from the vocational culture of each particular reality.

Given the infinity of pastoral planning strategies, it would be very risky on our part to offer unequivocally that which is considered the *best*. We will be moving toward an authentic Vincentian vocational culture as long as the proclamation of the Gospel of vocation from the radical and prophetic dimension of the Vincentian charism is our purpose, as long



as we move along the horizon of the New Evangelization and not along yesterday's horizon of recruitment, and as long as we cloth ourselves with an attitude, a sensitivity and a pedagogy that rejuvenates, on a daily basis, the face of the charism.

It would be good, however, to identify at least five elements that, by virtue of functionality, must be clear within a vocational ministry plan.

### **1. Identify agents**

The first question we must answer is: Who is going to lead this project? The answer is not so simple. There are different ways in which people can and should provide leadership to such a plan. For example, there are those directly responsible for vocational ministry, which generally refers to one person responsible on the provincial level and one responsible on the local community level. Leadership might also be given to a team that has been appointed for that purpose. Those teams should include the participation of lay people who have been formed in this area and should also include the participation of experts in the field of psychology. Indirect agents should also be brought into the process, that is, those who, because of their ministry or personal abilities, are themselves vocational motivators. A good example of indirect agents are the seminarians and those in the various stages of formation, who, due to their youth and creativity, are able to give a fresher face to vocation.

It is also important to identify the current agents, that is, those who are already committed to vocational work, and those who could be motivated in different ways, for example, missionaries who, on the occasion of a youth retreat, are asked





to administer the sacrament of reconciliation ... those missionaries might also be invited to share a reflection with young people who are in the process of discernment. Thus, little by little, they become more sensitive about this ministry. Saint Vincent de Paul was a mystic of charity who had an incredible ability to create networks of collaborators, people who gradually became part of God's work. That is what we must do when it comes to awakening interest in vocational ministry within the structures of the Congregation.

Regarding persons directly responsible for vocation ministry, the same selection criteria that are applied to formators should be utilized<sup>142</sup>. Above all, vocational animators and formators should be experts in a training model that integrates individuals from the perspective of the Vincentian charism but always beginning with the concrete specific reality. This supposes a good selection of individuals using the principle of suitability for ministry. In statistical studies carried out on the five continents as part of the preparations for the 2018 Synod, it was discovered that, *even though many young priests have expressed an availability for this ministry, there is a lack of sensitivity and preparation in the area of vocational ministry*<sup>143</sup>. In addition, we should also be concerned with the selection of suitable individuals because, together with personal availability for this ministry, one should also give witness to a life of virtue and possess the ability to accompany processes with the heart of a pastor, thus avoiding

<sup>142</sup> We recall here what has been expressed in the present *Ratio Formationis*, namely, that vocational discernment is a stage of the formation process; cf. *Ratio Formationis*, Chapter 2, Vocation Ministry Stages of Invitation, Inquiry and Discernment.

<sup>143</sup> Bishop Benvenuto Italo Castellani, *Analysis of the Reality of Vocational Ministry*, presentation delivered at the International Congress of Vocational Ministry, October 19-21, 2016 (Rome).

the vice denounced by Pope Francis: *neurotic formators who have mishandled young people's boundaries and instead of helping them grow, they would crush them. Finding good formators is also very important*<sup>144</sup>.

*Since the training of seminarians hinges, to a very large extent, on wise regulations and on suitable teachers, seminary directors and professors should be chosen from among the best, and be painstakingly prepared by solid doctrine, appropriate pastoral experience, and special spiritual and pedagogical training (Optatam Totius, #5).*

In summary, the *decatalogue* of characteristics which, according to Cardinal Suárez Inda, ought to distinguish those involved in the ministry of vocational accompaniment, can serve as an ideal x-ray that should be taken into consideration:

1. *Closeness that awakens trust.*
2. *Intuition to discover their veiled expectations and to perceive their request for help, often not expressed.*
3. *Being a credible and attractive witness through their own coherence of life, joy, and self-giving.*
4. *Being flexible with time and always available to listen.*
5. *Respect before those in whom the grace of an Almighty God manifests itself and from whom a free response is expected.*

<sup>144</sup> Pope Francis, *The Strength of a Vocation. Consecrated Life Today*, a conversation with Fernando Prado, CMF, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2018, p.70.



6. *Clarity in exposing the demands of a vocation without ambiguities.*
7. *Patience in order not to pressure or hurry others in their process, which may be slow.*
8. *To go out in search of those individuals and to facilitate an encounter without harassing them.*
9. *To console them in challenging moments.*
10. *To pray to obtain, in their favor, the grace of the vocation and light in their discernment<sup>145</sup>.*

## 2. Identify interlocutors

The horizon that the New Evangelization opens for us broadens the area of the activity of vocational ministry far beyond what is customary, even creating a rupture with the traditional models of *transmitter-receiver* or *agent-recipient*. In other words, if we begin with ongoing formation, then the agents are already recipients, and if we adopt a proposal that is geared toward the sensitivities of the new generation, it will be necessary to think of a more participatory process in which young people are not merely recipients of a message, but have the opportunity to share the mysticism, the mission and the community life that characterizes us.

*Evangelii Gaudium* #14 has identified three situations in proclaiming the good news: believers, those who have distanced themselves from the faith and those who have no knowledge of the person of Jesus. In a vocational ministry

<sup>145</sup> Cardinal Alberto Suarez Inda, *Pastoral Work for Vocation in the Life of the Church, presentation delivered at the International Congress of Vocational Ministry*, October 19-21, 2016 (Rome), accessed at:  
<http://www.clerus.va/content/dam/clerus/Dox/HEm%20Suarez%20Inda.pdf>



plan, the recipients must be specified according to particular realities, that is, we must clarify to whom we are going to direct each of the proposed actions of our plan. In the most traditional sense, young people in Catholic schools and parish youth groups were given priority, while adults (men and women who attended services in the parish church) were given the mission to offer acts of piety for priestly and religious vocations. When planning from the perspective of a vocational culture, we must cover all possible situations, but each one in a different way. From the perspective of a vocational kerygma, our plans must take into consideration those who are approaching the faith for the first time or are reintegrating themselves into the life of the church after having distanced themselves for some period of time. Our plans must include these various processes of specific accompaniment with a view toward discerning life in a vocation of special consecration.

It is necessary to pause so that, with an attitude and sensitivity toward a vocational culture, we discern what are the concrete faces of a certain reality to which the vocational ministry plan will be directed. To assume that this is obvious will usually lead to uncoordinated activities.

### **3. Plan the time and the place**

Usually, asking the questions *where* and *when* is extremely helpful to avoid the disease of idealistic plans. An organization that recognizes its own limitations and begins from the perspective of available spaces and budgeted times, ensures greater effectiveness in its services. Clarifying the time and place in which plans will be carried out forces us to establish the changes in situations that we want to achieve; that is, we begin from a very precise context and set an arrival point





within defined time limits. For example, within the framework of a plan, a first year of action could be defined in terms of convening, forming, and taking the first steps to create such a team.

As for a vocational culture, given the magnitude of the challenge and the importance of each activity that may be created, it becomes necessary to have personnel exclusively dedicated to the accompaniment of young men and women in a process of discernment, that is, missionaries or sisters freed from other positions, so that they can dedicate the time and effort that is necessary for this form of service. When vocational ministry is left as an appendix to the list of ministries, one cannot expect to obtain much fruit. If, however, we prioritize processes over activities, then dedication is needed to be able to accompany individuals (with mind, heart and hands), as they encounter progress and setback through group and personal processes.

At this point in our journey, we are assuming that the magnitude of the challenge posed by a vocational culture has been assimilated. If this has not occurred, little organization is required for a ministry with limited biblical/theological perspective and an equally limited scope of action, as is inviting restless young people to join the ranks of consecrated life. Good marketing advice would be sufficient so as not to waste unnecessary energy.

Since the invitation of the New Evangelization makes us feel the need to proclaim the Gospel of vocation at all times and in all places, it becomes inescapable to point out the places where we have the possibility of opening vocational spaces and organizing the time so that all are invited to participate in the wedding feast of the son of the King (cf. Matthew 29:9).



#### 4. Identify a purpose

The Vincentian charism demands us to follow Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor; everything else is ordered to that objective. From such a perspective, more mystical than logical, the objective of any Vincentian vocational ministry emerges.

If we are permitted criticism, we must say that the present *Ratio Formationis* is quite limited in the purpose that it points out for *the ministry of vocational promotion*, even the very concept of *promotion* should be read with some care:

*The goal of this stage of formation (vocation ministry) is to lead potential candidates to consider a Vincentian vocation and support them in discernment. This is the stage of “sowing seeds” (Ratio Formationis, Chapter 2, section 1.A).*

On the other hand, the Final Document of the First Meeting of Vocation Directors, which took place in Paris (2018), provides a much broader perspective:

*We are aware of the fact that it is urgent that we, as members of the Congregation of the Mission, commit ourselves to the ministry of accompanying young persons in their process of vocational discernment. Thus, an important element of our missionary charism is to support young persons and offer them the opportunity to discern their vocation from a faith perspective. At the same time, our accompaniment provides them with a further opportunity to listen to the*



*voice of God who calls them to commit their lives to the mission of evangelizing the poor*<sup>146</sup>.

The purpose of any vocational ministry in the context of the New Evangelization, or better, the purpose of a vocational culture will always be the proclamation of Jesus Christ, and from the perspective of the Vincentian charism, we proclaim Jesus as the Evangelizer of the poor. We do not simply suggest a specific vocation to possible candidates, but, rather, by *invoking* the Christ whom we follow, expressed in the radicalness of our mysticism, mission and community, we conclude by *challenging* people to embrace the passionate life that fills our existence with meaning and that, at the same time, *convokes* others to participate in this great plan of salvation.

In conclusion, in each particular reality, the desired purpose of vocational ministry plans must be clearly formulated. The formational dimension may receive greater emphasis in some plans and the methodological dimension in other plans but the objective will always be a ministry that proclaims Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor and *challenges* individuals to follow this Jesus, either inside or outside the institutions of the Vincentian Family, and finally, *convokes* those who have been called to become *truly holy*<sup>147</sup>.

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<sup>146</sup> First Meeting of Vocational Directors of the Congregation of the Mission (2018), Final Document accessed at:  
<https://cmglobal.org/en/2018/12/10/the-path-toward-a-culture-of-vocations-in-the-congregation-of-the-mission-final-document/>

<sup>147</sup> *preserve in your name those whom you have called and make them truly holy*; concluding words of the Vocation Prayer of the Vincentian Family, *Expectatio Israel*.



## 5. Concretize stages and strategies

*As for the young Samuel, so too for every man and every woman - vocation, while it may have strong and privileged moments, involves a long journey. The Word of the Lord needs time to be understood and interpreted; the mission to which it calls is revealed step by step. The young are fascinated by the adventure of gradual self-discovery. They learn willingly from the activities they carry out, from their encounters and their relationships, putting themselves to the test in daily life. Yet they need help to piece together the various experiences and to read them from a faith perspective, overcoming the risk of dispersal and recognizing the signs by which God speaks. In the discovery of a vocation, things are not all clear at once, because "faith 'sees' to the extent that it journeys, to the extent that it chooses to enter into the horizons opened up by God's word" (Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment, #77).*

One of the most important tasks in a vocational ministry plan will undoubtedly be the creation of the stages that must be organized in the search for an already established objective. If the objective of the plan is a response to the question, *what we want to achieve?* then stages of the plan must respond to the question, *how are we going to achieve our stated purpose?*

The *Ratio Formationis* has pointed out two phases: initial invitation and active discernment. At the same time, the



document, *New Vocations for a New Europe* (#32) has identified five actions that weave the vocational itinerary: *sow, accompany, educate, form and discern*. The Final Document of the II Latin American Congress on Vocations (#76) states that the progress of any vocation can be defined in terms of *awaken, discern, cultivate and accompany*.

Regardless of how the vocational process is named, in the various contexts where the charism of Saint Vincent has been incarnated, the essential element is to seek the gradual movement of human processes and to look for ways to enter into the depths of the *sensitivity* of each discerner, recognizing that an individual is being called to follow Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor. Therefore, we do not want people to move through the process of vocational discernment and initial formation as though they were completing a series of requirements. Rather we want individuals to achieve an integration-unity in their Vincentian vocation and become *docibilis* and passionate persons with regard to mission and charity

The well-known studies of the Jesuits, Luigi M. Rulla<sup>148</sup> and Franco Imoda<sup>149</sup>, in the area of the anthropology of the

<sup>148</sup> Luigi M. Rulla is a Jesuit priest. Since 1971 he has been a professor at the Psychological Institute of the Gregorian University in Rome. He worked as a surgeon for eight years and published a series of research articles at the same University. He has a licentiate in Philosophy (Gallarate) and in Theology (Woodstock College, USA). He studied psychiatry at the McGill University in Montreal and psychology at the University of Chicago. He is the author of several books and articles and has lectured throughout the world. He died in 2002. His noteworthy publications are: *Depth Psychology and Vocation* and *Anthropology of the Christian Vocation* (both are available at Amazon).

<sup>149</sup> Franco Imoda is a Jesuit priest. He has a licentiate in philosophy (France) and theology (Turin); he obtained a doctorate in psychology at the University of Chicago. He was Director of the Psychological Institute at the Gregorian

Christian vocation, could be utilized to respond to the question: how does the human person respond, with his/her motivational system, in order to accept the call of God and respond in a total manner? The proposal of these authors requires a much broader development than we intend at the moment, but Imoda's contributions are absolutely illuminating with regard to organizing the stages of vocational discernment as an ascending scale in *education for the mystery*.

For Imoda, the human person *is a mystery in him/herself* and this *human mystery* is open and channeled to the divine Mystery. We, from a reading of vocational theology, can say that *vocation*, as a theological category, is the place of encounter of these two realities. Therefore, the stages of discernment must create a mystagogical process in a parabolical manner, so that starting from the mystery of the person who lives in a liquid society where meaninglessness seems to reign, these young men and women are offered a process that is adjusted to their reality that is able to awaken them to the reality of the mysterious being and channel them towards the Mystery of the evangelizer of the poor.

*In mystery education, Imoda points out three complementary types of pedagogy, granting privilege to what he calls parabolic, because it better exploits the power of psychic mediations. Parabolic because, as the parables of the gospel teach, it begins with the questions that the person is currently asking and seeks to understand in those other deeper questions and*

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University in Rome from 1980-1986 and from 1993-1998. He was vice-rector and rector of the Gregorian University and since 2005 has been a consultor for the Congregation for Catholic Education. His book, *Psychology and Mystery* is published in English and available at Amazon.





*inquiries that lead one to a confrontation with the message of Christ questions (and therefore avoid going to the level of intellectual abstraction). The urge for self-authentication in reference to this message will not feel like an imposition or an obligation, but rather a personal demand for truth<sup>150</sup>.*

Strange as it may seem, we speak of mystagogical stages, not because they are part of a liturgical act, but because they progressively open the human heart to the mystery that is within. It is there that one hears the voice of the Eternal caller, the evangelizer of the poor that continues to challenge the children of the 21st century and to bring them together to the work of mission and charity.

To make this possible, it is essential that vocational ministry give priority to the reality of the beneficiaries rather than their own self-interest. At the same time, there is also a need to be convinced of the vocational power that springs from the Vincentian charism when lived in a passionate manner.

With all this, we can offer three strategies to create a vocational culture in our congregations, and at the same time, help us build vocational processes. This is all about turning the dimensions that integrate Vincentian identity into strategies (but never the other way around), a mysticism that evokes, a mission that convokes and a community that provokes.

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<sup>150</sup> Amedeo Cencini and Alessandro Manenti, *Psicología y Teología* [Psychology and Theology], Cantabria, 2019, p. 55.



## 5.1. First Strategy: an evocative mysticism

*Unfortunately, today haste and the speed of the stimuli to which we are subjected often do not leave space for that interior silence in which the Lord's call echoes<sup>151</sup>.* Therefore, we have the obligation to offer spaces where young people can have the experience of silence and encounter with Jesus Christ. Parabolically speaking, from the search for inner peace, perhaps somewhat neurotic at first, an awakening can spring from the mystery, implicit in the human heart, that makes one feel something that goes beyond self-interest and thus, the opportunity arises for the vocational kerygma that proclaims the mystery of the call of the evangelizer of the poor.

One way could be the establishment of houses of welcome which, without having to be formed as canonical houses, would be dedicated exclusively to this apostolate. Thus, specific communities that have been appointed to serve young people and adults would be able to offer these groups spaces where they can have an encounter with the Lord who calls them.

An example of these spaces could be spiritual exercises, which could utilize the many resources of the Vincentian tradition, which we must be able to express in language that is sensitive to the current reality. Such is the case of mental prayer, the repetition of prayer, the liturgical and sacramental life, the interiorization of the Vincentian virtues, the veneration of Divine Providence, *the special honor and devotion to the mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation* (Constitutions, #48), Marian devotion, above all to the Immaculate Virgin Mary in *the Sacred Medal* (Constitutions, #49), and the models of holiness that we venerate in the Vincentian Family (saints and

<sup>151</sup> Pope Francis, Address to the Participants in the International Conference on Pastoral Work for Vocations, October 21, 2016.

blessed), without forgetting *the heritage of our Founder, expressed in his writings and in the traditions of the Congregation* (Constitutions, #50).

This proposal to have *vocational houses of welcome* would be something similar (although maintaining the obvious differences) to what happened at time of our origin:

*About seven hundred to eight hundred people per year, came to Saint-Lazare to participate in the Exercises (that were paid by the priory). Between 1635 and 1660, with ups and downs, around twenty thousand retreatants would have passed through the doors of the old leprosarium. At one time, a Brother from the Congregation complained to Vincent about the excessive financial burden that this ministry placed on Saint-Lazare. Vincent replied: "Brother, they are the ones who want to be saved"<sup>152</sup>.*

## **5.2. Second Strategy: a mission that calls people together**

What is the clearest face of the Vincentian vocation? Of course, its mission. That is how history identifies us and, in fact, it is missionary work and charitable service that proclaims or denies identity with the charism of Saint Vincent.

We do not, however, represent a philanthropic organization because our mission arises from following Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor. That is why the Vincentian vocation is clearly *a mysticism of action* or *a mysticism of mission* or if you prefer *a mysticism of charity*. It is right there, in the midst

<sup>152</sup> Marie-Joëlle Guillaume, *Vincent de Paul, Un saint au Gran Siècle* [Vincent de Paul, a saint of the great century], p. 271.

of the power of the *mystical-vocational* where one finds the realization of that which enjoys a history of four centuries, the calling of God extended to Vincent de Paul.

We have said that the society of consumption, pleasure and materialism have created a consciousness that is not very accepting of definitive relationships but is very prone to create spiritualities of an egotistical nature. It is also true that the human soul discovers its meaning and its fullness when it journeys along the path for which it has been created: the mysticism of service, salvation, and mission.

A good vocational strategy is to create opportunities for service on behalf of those who are most poor ... opportunities in which young people can experience the meaning of life that is found in becoming a gift for others, especially for those who are on the peripheries. This is about discovering the face of Christ, evangelizer of the poor, the one who *convokes* men and women of all times and places to continue his work. In other words, the light of the human mystery shines forth and communicates the most beautiful news: we have been called to engage in a passionate work and if our life is to have meaning, then, from the perspective of the Vincentian charism, we express that meaning with the best pedagogy: our very life. We may do this for no other reason than that we find happiness in living in that manner and consequently, *we must neither seek nor expect rest, satisfaction, and blessings anywhere else but in the [Congregation of the] Mission, since that is the only place God wants and desires us to be* (CCD:XI:98).

### **5.3. Third Strategy: a community that challenges**

*If [young people] grow up in a desert devoid of meaning, where will they develop a desire to*

*devote their lives to sowing seeds? The experience of discontinuity, uprootedness and the collapse of fundamental certainties, fostered by today's media culture, creates a deep sense of orphanhood to which we must respond by creating an attractive and fraternal environment where others can live with a sense of purpose (Christus Vivit, #216).*

When speaking about the coordinates of a vocational culture, we stated that radicalism in our community life is a prophetic sign of enormous testimonial weight to the sensitivity of young men and women. Saint Vincent was right when he said: *how could you draw souls to Jesus Christ if you were not united among yourselves and with him?* (CCD:XI:137). An authentic community *provokes* a mysterious desire that challenges the sensitivities of those who have been formed in a world where the law of the most powerful prevails over the mandate of fraternity.

Therefore, it would be beneficial to promote opportunities for fraternal sharing with young people, where the joyous life that we lead within our community can be felt and, therefore, this should also be a never-ending theme of ongoing formation: learning to live as *good friends* (Common Rules, VIII:2).

The formation houses are a very valuable resource that can provide an experience of community to those who are in a time of discernment. Therefore, we should not spare efforts or postpone decisions for a healthy and mystagogical experience of the community, because we are dealing with a Vincentian treasure that sustains the lives of those who have been called and *awakens* a vocation in many others.

## Discern motivations

Everything that we have said places congregational structures at the service of the New Evangelization and, therefore, destined for the benefit of people. This does not, however, diminish the responsibility to be careful with regard to the motivation of individuals and equally careful in the selection of candidates who are interested in entering our formation houses. In fact, the vocational culture revitalizes the role of each specific vocation in the building up of the Kingdom of God. For that reason, the service of accompaniment during the discernment processes must be able to guide different individuals along the path of a specific vocation to which they feel called, and in which the Church confirms this discernment. This vocation, at times, may not be within the Vincentian Family.

In vocational animation and accompaniment, no one is excluded, every baptized person has been summoned by the Lord to donate their life in different ways, but when it comes to institutional doors, the openness of a vocational culture cannot be confused with an inability to discern and guide motivations.

This means that, those directly responsible for vocational ministry, as well as those who hold decision-making positions in the discernment processes, have a tremendous responsibility to ensure that no one comes into our community *entering through the window*<sup>153</sup>.

<sup>153</sup> In the letter that Vincent wrote to M. Dupont-Fournier, a lawyer in Laval (March 5, 1659), we read: *I would consider it a matter of conscience to do anything to have you take Holy Orders, especially priesthood, because it is a misfortune for those who enter it by the window of their own choice and not by the door of a legitimate vocation* (CCD:VII:479).



*The negative phenomenon of “vocational tourism” by those who have been excluded from a seminary or an institute and wander from one diocese or congregation to another until they find... their nest, with little probability of finding their own peace (or to be able to offer it to others). The most serious part of this phenomenon undoubtedly lies in the consenting attitude of superiors and formators towards these people, thinking that this contributes to solving the problem of numerical scarcity (turning a deaf ear to the canonical dispositions in this regard). This is the worst way to solve the vocational crisis<sup>154</sup>.*

The discernment of vocational motivation cannot be pressured by a numerical response that evaluates the quality of pastoral service according to the number of people who enter a formation house. Acting in that manner has many consequences, and the most negative of these is the pandemic of mediocrity.

Certainly, we are not saying that only “ideal individuals” can initiate a formation journey in a vocation of special consecration. There must, however, be some minimum requirements to enter a formation institution. Therefore, the formation plan should establish the criteria that are demanded in order to engage in a process of motivational purification in accord with the Vincentian vocation.

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<sup>154</sup> Amedeo Cencini, *Nuevas Realidades en Materia Vocacional* [New Realities in Vocational Matters], presentation at the International Congress on Vocational Ministry (Rome, 2016).



Assuming that it is the houses of formation or the seminaries that have the responsibility of sifting and removing those who do not seem fit from those institutions, this could mean postponing decisions. This delay is necessary because very often individuals have not been accompanied through the vocational processes in the best way, and in general, this brings painful consequences for the person who did not have the minimum requirements to enter initial formation. Sometimes even disasters are created within the formation communities, which could have been avoided with a more careful screening process. Furthermore, the inability to accompany people outside a house of formation is almost always accompanied by an inability to orient formation processes by means of a comprehensive Vincentian model.

As seen in *Evangelii Gaudium*, #14, it is necessary to proclaim the gospel of vocation to all, and no situation should be excluded. This does not mean, however, that we become desperate and accept candidates regardless of their motivation and justify such decisions by having recourse to a supposed vocational culture. Therefore, although it is true that we have been entrusted with the care of vocations in the ecclesial institution to which we belong, that does not exempt us from the responsibility of accompanying each baptized person in their quest to respond to the Lord. It is also our obligation to guide those people who may not have the *minimal* requirement for a possible vocation of special consecration. In those situations, we guide people toward an option in which they can live and serve according to their possibilities. This may occur inside or outside some branch of the Vincentian Family. Patience, love and holy indifference are required in order to accompany





individuals through the process of discernment, especially discerning motivations ... we can harm people when we act in haste.

Four months before his death, Vincent wrote to the superior in Richelieu and stated: *We are in the same difficulty as you as far as having priests in the seminary to be formed for preaching. We have only one, but he is not suitable for that.* Then, he goes on to say: *it is for God alone to choose those whom he wishes to call to it, and we are sure that one Missionary given by his fatherly hand will do more good by himself than many others who would not have a true vocation* (CCD:VIII:342).

Vincent was very clear that the concern for sustaining works should never take precedence over the demand of the vocational mysticism of a life dedicated to mission and charity.

This is what Vincentian vocational pedagogy is all about: *to go out* of the comfortable structures in order to allow ourselves to be formed through a model that integrates our life with that of Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor, whom we invoke with the Vincentian mysticism that identifies us; *to see* the reality with prophetic eyes in order to accompany that culture which, without knowing it, is eager to be challenged by the Gospel of vocation; *to call* people to the mission and charity, because we are confident that we have been called to live this passionate life project in community. This is the Vincentian vocational culture that consists of an ever-new process of discovering the place where God wants us.





