

Looking to the Immediate Past: a Challenging Horizon for the Construction of a Vincentian Identity

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In the midst of current changes and challenges, the Congregation of the Mission sought during its 40th General Assembly (Rome, 5-29 July 2004), to reflect on and to deepen its Vincentian identity. Out of this effort came the document, “Our Vincentian Identity Today in the Light of the Constitutions: Evaluation and Challenges.”

I will try here to sketch a few reflections based on the first part of the document, “A sincere look at the immediate past,” in the hopes of raising some points for a critical reading of it and for a creative reception, one both personal and collective, of the conclusions of the General Assembly.

I. The need for creative reception

Since some time has passed since the General Assembly, it is now time for the entire Congregation — provinces, local communities and confreres — to assimilate and accept the conclusions and proposals of the General Assembly. By the word “reception” we mean this entire process of assimilating and concretizing.¹ This ecclesiological category expresses the predominant concept of the Church as communion, and it applies to ecclesial groups, like the Congregation of the Mission, in its search for insertion into the current and specific life of the mission of the Church.

¹ On this point, see, Y. CONGAR, “La ‘réception’ comme réalité ecclésiologique,” *Revue des Sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 56 (1972) 369-403.

A genuine reception consists, on the part of the entire Congregation, in receiving the orientations and definitions coming from a higher level (from the General Assembly). Reception supposes a passive process, that is, what others drew up is received and accepted. It consists in appropriating the content of the General Assembly as legitimate and valid for the work and life of the provinces, local communities and confreres.

The acceptance of this content is certainly not to be reduced to an act of obedience but requires a vital incorporation of what the members of the Assembly proposed. Reception is likewise active and vital. The Assembly's document cannot be a definitive word to serve as a ready response of universal value, to handle completely the diversity of the situations in which the Congregation finds itself placed in the world. Provinces, local communities and individual confreres are called to concretize the proposals of the General Assembly in their lives, works and concrete situations. They should emphasize and discern the most relevant and pertinent perspectives for the various historical situations in which they exist. Beginning with the senses elaborated by the Assembly, other perspectives can be deepened and further meanings derived from the original text.

Consequently, on the basis of a proper epistemology, the sense of a text is not given only by its authors and by the words used. The members of the audience are also coauthors insofar as they place the message into the vital contexts in which they ponder and the relevance of the aspects that illumine or define historical situations. Reception should be creative, since reading always involves a rereading, just as understanding always implies interpretation.² The original message of the General Assembly is a source of living water, capable of producing new meanings as one prolongs and concretizes its original meaning.

II. Sincere attention to the immediate past

In its General Assembly, the Congregation of the Mission sought to reflect and deepen its Vincentian identity methodologically by evaluating its life over the past 20 years of the current Constitutions.

As its starting point the Assembly began with its experience of the concrete reality of the poor and of the Congregation. The 46 provinces and five vice-provinces of the Congregation began with the working document, drawn up by the Preparatory Commission of the General Assembly (CPAG). They then evaluated the contribution

² Cf. L. BOFF, *Do Lugar do Pobre*, Vozes, Petrópolis 1984, 27-30; English: *When Theology Listens to the Poor*, trans. Robert R. Barr, Harper & Row, San Francisco 1988.

of the Constitutions to the deepening and the shaping of our Vincentian identity as seen in the successes, failures and the main changes in the Congregation and in the world, as well as the great challenges for the Congregation's future.

The conclusions of the Provincial Assemblies³ offer a broad picture of the diverse reality and the many challenges of the Vincentian mission within the complexity of the present historical moment, filled with profound changes. This starting point imparted a strong historical conscience and a great effort to the General Assembly in evaluating the immediate past as well as in projecting the future of the Congregation.

1. *Affirming the value of the Constitutions*

After reviewing the road trod by the Congregation in the last 20 years, the General Assembly, in its *Final Document*, asserted that the present Constitutions are the positive result of the call to modernize, presented in Vatican II. Thus, it affirmed the quality and richness of the Constitutions in defining our identity. It manifested clearly its appreciation of them and recognized the successes gained under their inspiration and the difficulties still to be surmounted.

Although the Assembly recognized the value of the Constitutions, it showed no intention of revising them. Instead, it affirmed the urgent need to involve in the life, ministries and structures of the Congregation the identity that, at least theoretically, is embodied in them. It affirmed too that the Constitutions embody the insights of St. Vincent de Paul and the Vincentian tradition, and that they impel our life toward the following of Christ, the Evangelizer of the Poor. Together with this recognition, the Assembly proposed making the Constitutions a permanent point of reference, using them to search out the principles that inspire the mission and life of the Congregation.

The Assembly quoted the words of Fr. Richard McCullen in his promulgation of the new Constitutions: "Within the covers of this book our identity as a Congregation in the Church is delineated. We must not be content to leave that delineation on paper alone. The text must now be imprinted on our hearts and lived out in our vocation to preach the gospel to the poor." It affirmed that in these Constitutions are to be found the fundamental elements to delineate the quality of being Vincentian missionary.

³ Cf. *Synthesis of the Responses of the Provincial Assemblies*, in the Working Document of CPAG 04, photocopied text, distributed to the participants in the Assembly.

2. *The urgent call to creative fidelity*

The affirmation of the value and the modernity of the Constitutions, despite the difficulties and limitations of everyday life, imposes the urgent call to deploy in the mission and in Vincentian life the various elements that make up the identity described in the Constitutions, and to constantly examine our life.

In this sense, the Assembly's document urgently calls every confrere, local community and province to undertake dynamically what the Constitutions call us to, a creative fidelity. This means not falling into mediocrity and accommodation, but being a prophetic sign in urgent and generous missionary service, seeking new and living expressions of missionary service to the poor, being convinced witnesses and propagators of the vitality of the Vincentian vocation. Based on this creative fidelity, we will be able to give a reason for our identity and to respond to the challenges of the coming years.

A sincere look at the recent past in the Assembly's *Final Document* proposes to the Congregation of the Mission to travel the long road of hope, to construct a faithful and modern Vincentian identity. It invites the Congregation to become rooted in the vitality of the Vincentian mission in view of the "great history to construct" in following Christ, the Evangelizer of the Poor.

III. Creative reception of the lessons of the immediate past

In its *Final Document*, the Assembly summarized what seemed to it the most significant in the last 20 years of the life of the Congregation, and it sketched out a rich and challenging horizon for the development of the Vincentian mission.

The creative reception of the lessons of this immediate past requires an interpretation and deepening of the affirmations of the Assembly, taking into account its pastoral nature and the methodological conditions and practices in the process of reflection and development of its conclusions.

1. *The methodology and dynamic of the Assembly: successes and limits*

Within the rich experience of St. Vincent, where reality, particularly the reality of the poor, is the privileged place of God's revelation, the Assembly began from the concrete reality of the mission and life of the Congregation. By analyzing and gathering up the contributions of the Provincial Assemblies, it noted the historic changes that have arisen in the living out of the Constitutions and the challenges that they posed for the mission and the life of the Congregation.

On the basis of the historical reality of changes, the Assembly adopted an evangelical posture of discernment. In this way, it avoided an attitude of reactionary resistance (which takes the form of old ideas and practices regarded as untouchable and fixed), and a fundamentalist posture (which, given the uncertainty caused by changes, reacts by affirming the tradition literally, demonizing change and assuming reactionary, aggressive and extremist attitudes). In the light of evangelical and Vincentian values, the Assembly saw in change signs of God's call to construct our Vincentian identity.

Consequently, looking to the recent past it outlined and projected a path for the Congregation within an open perspective, one that is inventive in affirming the Constitutions and receptive of what is new and different for the Vincentian mission amid historical change.

On the other hand, a critical and objective analysis of the first part of the document shows that the General Assembly did not make a broad and complete analysis of the reality of the Congregation in its own historical path or in the reality of the Church and of the world. It limited itself to generic and exhortative affirmations of an inter-congregational character. The Assembly, in view of its pastoral character, did not intend to make a scientific analysis to exhaust the question. Nonetheless, it should be admitted that methodological difficulties and special factors rendered more difficult a better and broader analysis of the life of the Congregation in these last 20 years and its many demands as well as its many theoretical and practical implications for understanding the construction of a Vincentian identity.

I understand that two principal factors conditioned and limited reflection. First, the Assembly's schedule mixed together reflection on a general theme with various other issues and activities, such as information about the life of the Congregation, the participation of members of the Vincentian Family, elections of the Superior General and his council, and so on. Inevitably, this caused a certain dispersion and great tedium for the members of the Assembly, which, in turn, prevented a great depth and consistency in the analysis of the central theme of the Assembly.

Another factor inhibiting reflection was the *Directory* approved by the Assembly to guide the dynamic of reflection and work of the members. According to the norms of the *Directory*, the working groups, using the "Documentum Laboris," were to make their reflections and proposals and bring them to the plenary session in the form of texts to be maintained, modified, or expanded for the development of the *Final Document* of the Assembly. Following the precise and rigid norms of the *Directory*, the work in the plenary

session consisted more in the effort to draw up a text than in reflection and debate, properly speaking, concerning the construction of a Vincentian identity. The abundant and rich reflections and ideas of the working groups were not deepened during the plenary session and became lost or diluted amid editorial and formal concerns raised by the *Directory*.

The practical demands of the *Directory* brought about fatigue and scattered the attention of the members of the Assembly. Further, in the absence of specialized advisors, the *Directory* made a systematic, broad and deep reflection on Vincentian identity very difficult. Apart from isolated interventions, the plenary sessions did not reflect on or deepen what was understood by identity, nor on the theological, sociological, psychological implications, etc., in the concrete process of development. The Assembly's dynamic and methodology did not allow the plenary sessions to devote themselves in any systematic or intense way to the historical and present reality of the Congregation, or to the world of the poor in view of what the Constitutions propose, and on that basis to deepen the implications and challenges for the construction of a Vincentian identity.

These limits explain the generic character of the affirmation concerning a sincere look at the immediate past in the life of the Congregation, as well as in the second and third parts of the Final Document. Limiting this analytical and theoretical base did not allow a clearer or deeper expression of the necessary articulation between the identity proposed in the Constitutions and the new demands and expressions needed for a coherent and up-to-date construction of Vincentian identity. The identity presented in the Constitutions requires a personal and collective process of identification through a process of existential and spiritual assimilation and a search for historical and concrete expressions of identity that the Constitutions theoretically present and which we accept for ourselves.

"The identity of the consecrated life is not a one-time reality. It is coming to be, it is being constructed. And this happens in relation to the different events of historical reality that arise. The opposite of the construction and the coming to be of identity is stability, immutability and sameness. Identity does not exist as something fixed or defined once and for all. Rigidity in identity is deadly, and accommodation is mortal, since what is remains to be discovered. Identity exists only in intimate relation with differences and in permanent transformation."⁴ Examining the immediate past rejects the rigidity of reactionaries or fundamentalists, but it does not deepen understanding nor the juncture between the affirmation of

⁴ J.B. LIBÂNIO, "A Identidade da Vida Consagrada e o contexto atual," *Convergência*, 367 (2003) 536.

Vincentian identity delineated in the Constitutions and the demands of the differences that the realities of the poor and of the Congregation impose today for the construction of Vincentian identity. What new expressions and commitments do the differences of the present historical moment call forth for understanding and living out what the Constitutions set down?

Fr. Libânio says that the formation of the identity of a social group (a congregation, for example) comes to be within a dynamic process, with moments of stability, deconstruction and construction. "When a social group arrives at experiencing an identity in a clear and well-structured way, we are at the high point of its evolution, that is, at the beginning of its decline. When a wave reaches its highest point, it rapidly begins its decline. Perfect analyses are its swan song."⁵ In its post-conciliar development, what are the deconstructive, constructive and conservative tendencies present in the Congregation, and producing advances and resistance? What concrete tendencies exist among us that bring about a situation of conflict between the delights binding us to the past and the present concrete initiatives that express, or not, the vitality of the charism and the desires that propel us into the future?

2. *The rich, challenging and promising horizon of creative fidelity*

An honest look at the steps undertaken in the last 20 years in the Congregation will call us to creative fidelity. When it uses a rhetoric that is exhortatory and not analytical, the document of the General Assembly situates us within the current issue of the "refoundation" of consecrated life. So as not to fall into voluntarist and useless discussions and proposals, it is necessary to receive and deepen this rich proposal of the Assembly within a challenging and pertinent theological reflection about what we today call "refoundation."

Making use of three suggestive images,⁶ we may state, first, that creative fidelity, or refoundation, means searching for new wines in new wineskins. New responses are needed for new problems. By means of today's challenges, refoundation implies exercising one's creative imagination without being stuck in the remains of a noble but ruined and lifeless past. Second, creative fidelity or refoundation is like an alarm clock: it pulls us from our night's sleep, calls us to leave our bed and to begin a new day full of surprises. Refoundation implies putting our feet on the floor of history, washing our face and opening our eyes to the challenges of reality, leaving a warm and

⁵ J.B. LIBÂNIO, *A Volta à Grande Disciplina*, São Paulo 1983, 19.

⁶ Cf. JOSÉ MARÍA ARNÁIZ, *Del Ocaso al Alba - Reflexiones sobre la Refundación*, 1999, pp. 2-6.

comfortable bed, putting on new clothes and working in building a new consecrated life. Third, creative fidelity or refoundation is a change of program. Using computer language, refounding is like installing a new program to process the data of charism on the basis of the experiences and needs of people today, and to do so in a new, evangelical way.

Refounding implies translating the founding charism into new practices and structures appropriate to our reality. It does not mean repeating what the Founder did or said, but rather gathering up his authentic intuitions and concretizing them in discourses, practices and structures that will be coherent and adequate to the demands of the present day. It implies returning to our “first love” and promoting necessary changes so that the founding spirit and the structures of life and action come together in a new unity that is at once fertile, harmonious and meaningful.

Creative fidelity or refoundation is not something that takes place from one day to the next; it is not the automatic fruit of someone’s desires and idealistic or pious acts. Neither is it a reality that arises mechanically from an institutional decree. It is not the fruit of theological velleities, of a decontextualized missionary ardor, of a clear and distinct idea, or of a technically perfect plan. It is also not the result of passing fads, or of inconsistent emotional impulses.

Authentic refoundation is a long, difficult, necessary and complex process in building a new way of being for consecrated life. It requires personal and communal conversion. It also has the dimension of grace and of the vocational call of the Spirit. God speaks to us in history and, through the action of the Spirit, summons us to answer his calls. A spirit of faith, courageous prophecy, attentive reading of the signs of the times, listening to the divine call, a prayerful attitude and continuous discernment, dialogue with the experience of the founder and his charism — all these are indispensable spiritual attitudes. To these we should add strategies and tactics of institutional reformulation to truly bring about a response to the call of the Spirit for creative fidelity.

The process of creative fidelity or refoundation is, in the last instance, a way of the Spirit, but one without signs and precise or exact rules for its development. Each individual, group or congregation does this in an original way. The process unfolds when, in openness to the Spirit, a group lets itself be questioned through a dynamic interaction between its charism and the calls of God in history. Out of this grows the need to return to the roots of one’s own charism, to discern the calls of God in history, and to think about concrete steps to elaborate new behaviors and structures of life and action on a personal, communitarian and institutional level. Genuine refoundation is born from inside out, from top to bottom.

Refoundation demands courage to change deeply. Every change demands breaks with the past and decisions that are courageous, risky and painful.

In its conclusion, the *Final Document* of the Assembly alludes to the distant past, the exemplary witness of St. Justin De Jacobis, and it repeats a quotation from the message of John Paul II that summons us to put out into the deep. Past and present join in the building of a future of creative fidelity in the living out of the Vincentian mission. The risk of the immediate past of the Congregation, the past 20 years of living out the present Constitutions, shows the richness and the modernity of the Vincentian mission sketched by the Constitutions, and the need to put out into deeper waters, to try to deepen the living out of our Vincentian identity through a confrontation with the changes and challenges that happen within the Congregation and in today's world.

A faithful and contemporary embodiment of the Vincentian mission demands a deepening and accepting of the differences between the reality of past and present, as well as a dialogue with them in view of a courageous and daring task of continuously constructing our Vincentian identity. Within a process of the creative receptivity of the horizon drawn up by the Assembly, all of us, confreres, local communities and provinces, are summoned and challenged to engage in this adventure of searching out new and authentic expressions to give today more visibility, consistency, dynamism and evangelical modernity to the Vincentian charism. In this way, we will put out into the deep waters of the Vincentian charism and build a great history of missionary service to the poor.

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