

The Vincentian Charism in the Church

1. THE CHARISM OF ST. VINCENT AND VISION OF THE CHURCH

Since its beginning the Church has brought together unity and a healthy pluralism when implementing certain aspects of its life and organization, maintaining unity over what is fundamental and a certain degree of liberty over what is accidental. Throughout history there have appeared different types of communities and different “spiritual families,” which tried to live in fidelity to the Gospel, emphasizing some aspects, which gave a certain charismatic identity within the Church.

For the “Vincentian Family” it is important to know how St. Vincent lived and understood his “being Church,” since his experience may enlighten our place among the pilgrim People of God in history. The Church, together with the Gospel and the Poor, was for him one of the greatest keys of his growth in faith. While he discovered his vocation and mission in the poor, the sacrament of Christ, the Gospel enlightened and involved him, and the Church was the point of reference where he received his vocation and carried out his mission.

1.1. Ecclesial Experience of St. Vincent de Paul

We will not find in St. Vincent a single and static image; rather, his conception of the Church will continue evolving and maturing throughout his life, marked above all by a series of experiences which will purify and complete the authentic face of the Church and his mission in it. The young Vincent comes across a Church which contemplates a seemingly hierarchical and clerical society, one in which he aspires to “a career.” But God will talk to him through different experiences, which will purify his vision of the Church of Jesus, a Church that he discovers as the People of God (experience in Clichy), evangelizer of the poor (Gannes-Folleville), “good Samaritan” for the marginalized (Châtillon), guided by the Spirit (Montmirail-Marchais), and universal and missionary (Madagascar).

In order to appreciate the contribution of Vincent to the formation of the Church of his time, it is necessary to situate it and see it within the ecclesial context in which he lived and reflected on

the Church. As a man after the Council of Trent, he is influenced by the image of the Church which sprouted from it. Although this Council did not deepen the ecclesial issue, its reform programs had as their base a determined, underlying ecclesiology and the vision of the Church as a “perfect society” with these characteristics: societal dimension, hierarchical structure, indifference and even hostility towards the world, apologetic and anti-protestant character, etc.

The Church which St. Vincent de Paul experienced is a community incarnated in history: pilgrim, sinful, divided, interdependent from the state, at times with some pastors who are incompetent and unworthy, with some religious communities which need reform and an abandoned Christian people who need a profound evangelization, etc.

1.2. Vision of the Church in St. Vincent de Paul

Starting from this ecclesial situation and as a response to these urgent situations, Vincent discovers and tries to put into practice a new image of the Church, one that is evangelical and which has the following among other marks:

- “Mysterious” character of the Church, which cannot be reduced to its more visible and social aspect. The Church is a divine work which has its origin in the Trinity. It is a work of the Father, which carries on the mission of Christ, evangelizer of the poor, guided by the Holy Spirit.
- Close relation between the Church and the Kingdom. The Church has as its mission to establish the Kingdom and spread it throughout the world, a Kingdom wherein the privileged ones are the poor, those who, in spite of beginning their life in this world, do not have its fullness here.
- Centrality of the category of people, of the “poor people”; the hierarchy and all ecclesial life must be in function of this.
- Insistence on the theme of evangelization “by word and work,” as the fundamental mission of the Church and its structuring element.
- The central place of the poor in the “body of Christ,” setting the basis for a reflection on the “Church of the Poor.” The spirit of charity and mercy has to be a mark of the People of God, if one is to be faithful to God and credible to men.
- Evangelic vision of the role of authority in the Church, contemplating the persons of the Pope, bishops and the other ministers from their vocation of service more than from their categories of power.

- Renovation of religious life and the opening of new channels of consecration to God, from within the world, and an option for the service of the poor.
- Rediscovery of the place of the laity in the life of the Church, coming from a baptismal spirituality, the universal call to holiness and its participation in apostolic life, especially in the fields of charity and evangelization.
- Reinsertion of the woman in the life of the Church and its apostolic work through feminine lay associations.

Some of these intuitions, which were, at times, more applied and lived-out than theorized, have made it possible for Vincent de Paul to be considered as “one of the architects of the modern Church.” Given that these contributions have been assumed and enriched by praxis and post-ecclesial reflection, he may be considered as an authentic “prophet of the present ecclesiology.” With reason, during the funeral prayer at the death of St. Vincent, his friend, Msgr. Maupas de Tours, affirmed that, “He just about changed the face of the Church.”

2. MODEL OF THE CHURCH IN THE VINCENTIAN CHARISM: THE CHURCH OF THE POOR AND FOR THE POOR

The taking of ecclesiological positions multiplied in the years after Vatican Council II. The Pre-Conciliar model — institutional and societal — was maintained, but the proposal for a communal Church made by *Lumen Gentium* or the proposal for an open Church, servant of the world, by *Gaudium et Spes*, were being assumed.

Soon, however, a new model was to be glimpsed in a world divided between developed peoples and those who are still in the process of development, who are getting poorer and poorer all the time: the Church of the Poor. This model sprung forth, especially in the world of poverty, from certain documents, such as the encyclical, *Populorum Progressio* of Pope Paul VI, or the conclusions of the Latin American Episcopal Conference at Medellín and Puebla, as well as a reflection from “Liberation Theology.”

In the light of *Gaudium et Spes*, this model presents a Church which desires to commit itself to the service of humanity, but concretely to this real humanity which divides men on the world level, making “the rich richer and the poor poorer” each time. Before this harsh reality, the Church must not remain indifferent, but rather it should find solutions in the Gospel, making a clear “option for the poor,” placing itself on the side of the lost, the outcast and the marginalized, converting itself into a Church for the service of the “non-humanity.”

2.1. Characteristics of the “Church of the Poor”

Some of the characteristics of the face of this Church of the Poor are:

- It is centered in the world of the poor and from them it contemplates and discerns reality. The poor are not a “part” within it; they are the core of its totality.
- It is a “prophetic” Church, which knows how to discern in what happens in the present world, the signs of the presence of God, as well as the presence of the “mystery of evil,” which acts against the plans of God. For this, in addition to proclaiming the will of God throughout the world, it has to denounce sin and sinful structures which are opposed to these projects of God.
- It is a Church which continues in history the option of Jesus of Nazareth for the poor and the marginalized.
- It is a Church which interprets its saving mission as an “integral liberation” from all types of slavery of the entire man and of all men. It is a Church which, aside from proclaiming the Good News, tries to convert itself into a “good reality,” through the liberation of the oppressed.
- It is a Church which, in its service to the Kingdom of God, emphasizes the evangelical perspective of the priority of the poor in this promised Kingdom, for they are the privileged ones of the Kingdom.
- It is a Church in which the relations among its members are based on equality and fraternal service and in which the poor are the principal protagonists. It is a Church which is not only for the poor, but it is with the poor and, preferably, of the poor.

2.2. Vincent de Paul, inspiration of the “Church of the Poor”

This model of the Church has many points of contact with the ecclesial experience of St. Vincent, who may be considered a precursor or prophet of this vision of the Church centered on the poor. The poor taught Vincent de Paul to understand the Church and its mission. His contact with them led him to contemplate the ecclesial community with new eyes and commit himself to its reform in order to give it a new face, one that is more evangelical by its proximity and service to the poor. Let us look at some convictions of St. Vincent in relation to this ecclesiological model:

- The poor are concrete persons (not a category or idea), who live in a situation of misery, exploitation, marginaliz-

ation, and injustice. But aside from that, in the light of faith, they appear to him as “a living mediation of Christ,” “sacraments” of him who “wanted to become poor and is represented to us in the poor.” They are the favored ones of God and among them is the “true religion.” This “mystic” vision of the poor lays the foundation for his understanding of the Church, which has to be understood and organized in function of the poor. He thus rediscovered in the Church of his time an aspect which had been abandoned: an option for the poor, “the most precious members of the body of Christ.”

- The poor are the favored ones of the mission of Christ and his Church. Vincent contemplates Jesus Christ, above all, as the “evangelizer of the poor.” “He himself desired to be born poor, to welcome the poor in his company, to serve the poor, to put himself in the place of the poor....” From this Christological vision, he discovers that the Church, as an image of Christ in the world and continuing his mission, has to take on the attitudes of the Master and present itself as poor and servant of the poor.
- “God started the Church with some poor people.” Looking back at the beginnings, St. Vincent discovers that Jesus “upon instituting the Church chose poor men, ignorant and fishermen, to found and plant it in the whole earth.” God still chooses “poor people” to continue his work in the Church.
- “The Church of Jesus Christ is the city of the poor.” “In the Kingdom of Jesus Christ, pre-eminence belongs to the poor, who are the firstborn of his Church and his true children.” “In the world, the poor depend upon the rich and seem to have been born only to serve them; on the contrary, in the Holy Church, the rich are not admitted but on condition of serving the poor” (J.B. BOSSUET, “Sermon on the Eminent Dignity of the Poor in the Church”).

The Church is for the poor: preferential option for the poor. It is one of the greatest concerns of St. Vincent in his life: to give back to the clergy and the laity solidarity with and service to the poor, as requirements of their own faith. He sees the need of the Church to be converted to the world of the poor in order to become an authentic image of Jesus Christ. To return the poor to the Church and the Church to the poor is thus how one may summarize his work.

The Church of the Poor has to be a merciful Church. The Church fulfills itself and makes itself credible by compassion, which must be one of the “marks” of the true Church of God.

From these convictions of St. Vincent, which gave meaning to his life and motivation to his works, the “Vincentian Family” cannot forget this face of the Church: a poor Church and servant of the poor, a “merciful” Church which makes itself “Good Samaritan” to the outcasts in an unjust world. This is the face of the Church which the “Vincentian Family” is called to give in order to be faithful to the Vincentian charism, to build a Church with its own style and to give credibility to the Church of Jesus Christ, which, above all, must be the Church of the Poor.

3. THE CHARISM OF ST. VINCENT IN THE CHURCH

Many followers of Jesus Christ consider St. Vincent de Paul as their “spiritual father,” as an inspiration and guide by his presence and action in the Church and in the world. The life, doctrine and charism of Vincent, in spite of the temporal distance, continue to inspire their style of being Christian.

Various Religious Communities, Societies of Apostolic Life and Associations of the Laity directly created by him or inspired by his spirit, take St. Vincent as their “father.” As such, he has become a “patriarch” of the Church, a “father of many people.”

This fact makes us aware that we form part of a family within the Church, the “Vincentian Family,” with some common roots. This family is “multifaceted,” since the Spirit in diverse eras and circumstances inspired different instruments and institutions to respond to the call of God in favor of the poor from the same Vincentian charism. Although in a broad sense the Vincentian Family is composed of more than 268 institutions, insofar as they have adopted characteristic aspects of the Vincentian charism, in a restricted sense in speaking of this Family we refer to a concrete group of ecclesial associations: Congregation of the Mission, Daughters of Charity, International Association of Charities, Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Association of the Miraculous Medal, Vincentian Marian Youth, Vincentian Lay Missionaries, etc.

This plurality of the Vincentian Family implies, for its members, a task of knowing what is “common,” what unites, what creates communion and allows us to form ourselves, work and celebrate together. However, it is necessary to know what is proper to each Vincentian association and its identity in the Church in order to respect and appreciate its autonomy.

Yet insofar as we are all in the Church and work from it in the same mission, union and collaboration in the Family will be a means for our apostolate of charity to be more effective: “Act together against poverty.” Guaranteeing the continuity of the mission that God entrusted to St. Vincent in the world of the poor — and not so

much the survival of each association — has to be a great challenge for our “Family.” Poverties continue to speak to us so that we might act together.

4. CONSCIENCE OF THE FAMILY: VINCENTIAN SPIRITUALITY

Starting from spirituality as “the process of following Christ, under the impetus of the Spirit and the guidance of the Church,” one may say that each Christian has to have his/her own spirituality. Within the unique Christian spirituality, there could be varied spiritualities, which are not essentially different, for they always refer to the following of Jesus, but vary in the historical modality of following him and the values of his message that they emphasize.

When a group of persons, usually following a master, take on the very characteristics and values of Christ, we say that they live out the same spirituality. As such, we can speak of the spirituality of the “Vincentian Family,” insofar as we drink from St. Vincent’s special experience of Christ, which continues to inspire his followers today. The same spirituality may be lived out in the diverse states of life and in various times and places with slight differences. This awareness of living the same “spirit” is what creates in the Church the consciousness of “family.” What is essential in the Vincentian charism is the following of Christ, evangelizer and servant of the poor, from whatever state or condition of life, man or woman, clergy or layperson, adult or young person, Catholic or not, married or celibate.

Trying to gather some of these characteristics of Vincentian spirituality, which creates in all of us, who are inspired by St. Vincent, a certain consciousness as a family, we can highlight the following:

– **Theocentric spirituality: “Being dedicated to God”**

The Vincentian is anchored in God. His/her primary vocation is to be dedicated to him. He/she lives a privileged relation with the Trinity, beginning and model of his/her spiritual dynamics. He/she does everything to please God and “does always and in everything the will of God, doing what the Son of God himself came to do on the earth....”

– **Christocentric spirituality: “Live for Christ”**

The Vincentian has Christ as the “rule of his/her life,” “the life of his/her life,” “the sole aspiration of his/her heart.” He is “the true model and it is in this large picture that we have to shape all our acts.” Looking at ourselves in Christ, we contemplate him as the “adorer and missionary of the Father and servant of his loving design,” who makes his own the prophetic words: “He has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor” (Lk 4:18). “Our

vocation is a continuation of that of Jesus Christ... to reveal God to the poor, to proclaim Jesus Christ to them and to say to them that the Kingdom of God is at hand and that this kingdom is for the poor.”

– **Charismatic spirituality**

The members of the Vincentian Family, within their diversity, recognize in St. Vincent and his manner of life the “spirit of Jesus Christ,” his main source of inspiration. His way of listening to God, reading the Gospel and following Christ were so extraordinary that he continues to be a model and source of inspiration for many people and organizations that work in the field of evangelization and promotion of justice and charity.

– **Ecclesial spirituality: in the Church and as Church**

The Vincentian lives out his/her vocation and mission in the Church and as Church. People of God, members of the Body of Christ and living stones of the temple of the Spirit, we sense a dynamic force within the Church, appreciating fraternal life and working as a team. He/she lives attentive to the Social Doctrine of the Church in order to know critically the reality of the world and have criteria and principles of action for his/her social and charitable work.

– **Spirituality of action: “All our work is in action”**

The Vincentian is aware that charity is neither a task of intelligence nor of feelings alone; rather, it is manifested above all in action. The love of God is expressed with works and in truth: “Brothers and sisters, let us love God, but let it be with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows.”

Contemplative in action, the Vincentian is inserted in the world, especially in that of poverty, in order to discover the needs of those whom by “turning the medal” one sees as brothers and sisters, images of Christ.

The Vincentian Family, more than a group of social reformers moved by sociological or political currents, is a community of Christians which believes in the power of affective and effective love, which feels urged by the love of Christ.

– **Spirituality of incarnate service and solidarity: to serve the integral man**

The Vincentian lives a personal encounter with the poor, in the light of the testimony of St. Vincent, who sees in them “his burden and pain,” “his lords and masters,” “signs of the presence of God” and “sacraments” of the suffering Christ.

From this “mysticism” of the poor, he carries out his corporal and spiritual service of the weaker and marginalized, discovering in them his “portion” and showing the “partiality of God,” who demonstrates his option for the littlest ones.

Recognizing the dignity of the poor, worthy of all respect, the Vincentian is situated close to the poor and accompanies them with love, gentleness, respect... trying to remedy their specific needs, yet without failing to look for more general solutions from an analysis of the causes of poverty and seeking promotion and change of structures. Assistance, promotion and commitment for justice go together in his mission.

– **Liberating spirituality**

The Vincentian has experienced that the Gospel is a liberating force for everyone and preferably for those whom suffering and injustice visit. For them, in order to give life to the Gospel, he/she commits him/herself to the promotion of the person, of the entire person and of all people.

Organization is important in charitable activity, because we have to work together against poverties, since the plurality of the forms and faces of poverty requires a multiple and coordinated response.

– **Missionary spirituality, open to universality from inculturation**

The Vincentian Family is aware of its plural and intercultural reality. Furthermore, it feels called to the universal mission of the Church, which does not close in on some determined frontiers of place or culture, but rather is open to the global presence of poverty and an overall response to the world’s problems.

– **Committed Marian spirituality**

The Vincentian grants an important place in his/her spiritual experience to Mary, discovering in her the “mother,” model and intercessor, especially in the message of the apparitions of the Blessed Virgin to St. Catherine and the gift of the “Miraculous” Medal. She invites us to live by listening to the Word, contemplating God in life and Jesus Christ in the poor, serving as she did with the option for the littlest ones.

– **Vital, witnessing spirituality**

Vincentian Spirituality is concretized in a style, in a willingness of the person and the Christian, which is marked by the practice of some rather specific virtues or values. Vincent was aware of human weakness. For this reason, he gave his own a series of counsels and points of reference that would help them to lead a

life in the proper spirit and would be the distinguishing signs of the Vincentian identity. Among these “virtues of one’s state,” he will insist on simplicity, humility and charity (for the Daughters of Charity and members of the Confraternities), to which he will add gentleness, mortification and zeal (for the Missionaries). The Conferences of Ozanam take joy, cordiality and justice among the favorite virtues; the members of the Vincentian Marian Youth emphasize the spirit of collaboration, sensitivity to poverties, fulfilling the will of God, and openness.