

# Quality of Life in the Vincentian Missionary Vocation

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The Church, Institutes of Consecrated Life, the Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity have recently been talking about **rekindling the fire, refounding, renewing, and revitalizing**. These words are not as important as the reality that they imply because each of these words points toward one great truth: we are not satisfied with the way we are living our lives; we are not satisfied with what we are doing and we experience that something is happening around us or within us that is not right. Perhaps we have achieved many accomplishments in our pastoral or academic ministry or in our apostolic and missionary life, but perhaps we have not achieved an **evangelical efficacy** in regards to who we are and what we do.

Throughout these years we have undertaken a process of evaluating our lives, our vocation, and our works. We have strengthened our community life, reorganized our ministries, undertaken new tasks, confronted crises and made commitments to the world and the Church and made further commitments to the proper demands of our Vincentian vocation.

Perhaps the hour has come *to look for that which alone is necessary*. Perhaps the hour has come to center our attention on the most primordial objective: to look for a *quality of life in our personal, community and missionary life*. This is a legitimate, necessary and obligatory ideal in our vocation. A qualitative life will be revealed in a qualitative missionary life, a qualitative community life, and this in turn will lead to a more enthusiastic and happy vocational life, a sense of satisfaction in being and doing that involves our entire vocational life and our total following of Jesus Christ, evangelizing the poor.

## **To Look for the Quality of Life, a Sign of the Times?**

We speak about the quality of life because this is an undeniable ideal of the great gift that we have received from God. It is an ideal that, according to some people, has become an obsession in almost every part of our society. Everything is judged and related to from the perspective of the ideal of the quality of life: birth and death, health and illness, work and rest, work time and vacation time. Professionals in psychology, medicine, diets, business and gyms dedicate themselves unceasingly to the ideal of the quality of life. The quality of life is a profitable ideal because it has become a true obsession for men and women of our time and numerous necessities have been generated by this ideal.

We can look at all of this in a distinct way, that is, we can look at this *ad intra*, look at ourselves as missionaries and as people who are attentive to the signs of the times. Indeed, the first part of our Constitutions, which refer to our vocation, invite us to do just that. In our Constitutions we are invited to look at the signs of the times in our life, not only as they refer to our work or the process of evangelization but especially as they refer to the living out of our vocation. We have to allow this powerful call to question us; that is, we have to allow this call concerning the quality of life to question the way we are living and the way we donate our life to the poor.

## **What is Understood by Quality of Life?**

In the first place, quality of life refers to the proper functioning of the human faculties, that is, our psychic, bodily, moral and social faculties. When human beings function well, they achieve a level of well-being that results in a quality of life. Quality of life is an intense life that is not lived half-heartedly, but rather a life in which people put their whole heart into what they do. In this sense the quality of life becomes identified with the quality of our relationships, our affective life, and our ability to love and be loved.

To carry on an intense life, which is developed by not allowing opportunities to pass us by, is to return to a decision to live life fully and that is especially true if we have allowed ourselves to become caught up in routine or if the direction of our life has become blurred. If we are not content with our present life then to achieve or to better the quality of life means that we renew life and reinforce our convictions and our options in life. Thus we achieve a bodily, emotional, psychic and spiritual harmony which leads us to the fullness of a happy life and consequently a more joyful and fuller vocational life.

## What is Our Quality of Life?

We have been too concerned about reforms and the renewal of our works and ministries, too concerned about the challenges and struggles and the old and new commitments in our missionary life, too concerned about a certain unchecked activism and the routine and structure of life that is strangling and consuming us and making us lose our joy in life, the happiness and pleasure of our vocation. In fact, it is just and necessary that we ask ourselves this question: **What is the quality of our life?** Hopefully the many urges and the great amount of work and the multiple structures and things that must be done — hopefully all of these have not made us forget to live life, because people who do not live life generally reflect this reality in their life and in their surroundings and this is often reflected in the form of bitterness, sadness, deceit or melancholy. In conclusion: **living a qualitative life is the primary right and obligation of every human being.**

As Vincentians, we know that the poor do not just want to hear beautiful words or be the beneficiaries of our action. Our *lords and masters*, as our Founder calls them, want to find something more in us. They want to see credible signs and so we must witness to the gospel and be authentic expressions of love and happiness, signs of a lively hope especially in this world of despair. We can say that the poor not only need food and housing, but also need hope and happiness. Therefore, they will believe more because of what they see expressed on our faces, than what they hear with their ears. Saint Vincent tells us: *Facial expressions indicate the dispositions of the heart and, as a rule, reflect what's within...*<sup>1</sup> to proclaim the truths and the maxims of the gospel of Jesus Christ, not with words but by living our lives in conformity with Jesus Christ and giving witness....<sup>2</sup>

## The Quality of Our Vocational Life

Our missionary life ought to result in happiness, optimism and enthusiasm, but our consecrated and missionary life seems to lack this happiness and joy and as a result is unattractive and people are unwilling to join our ranks. This affects not only those persons who desire to enter the Vincentian Family, but also affects those who are already members and who are making a constant effort to rekindle the fire in their beloved Vincentian missionary vocation.

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<sup>1</sup> VINCENT DE PAUL, *Correspondence, Conferences, Documents* [CCD], X, 245.

<sup>2</sup> SV XI, 175; Conferences to the Missionaries, Extract from a conference, April 1655, News of FRANÇOIS LE BLANC, a missionary in Scotland.

The lack of a qualitative life gives rise to melancholy, a form of sadness profoundly rooted in the soul that brings about death as a result of the routine and the monotony and mechanics of life. Many times this occurs when life has lost meaning, when there are no objectives in life and life has lost its zest, when life has lost its quality and is no longer lived fully, when life becomes simply a matter of survival. In these cases people are alive physically but dead within, *a form of living death* that, in the words of our Founder, transforms us into *skeletons of missionaries*. Those who were called to give life, to generate and proclaim life to the poor have become **corpses of missionaries** and **not true missionaries**.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than ask ourselves how are we carrying out the process of evangelization or the mission, we should ask *how are we living life* and *how are we living our vocation*. We should try to live life with meaning and with zest. Recently there has been a focus on the vocational crisis and despite this reality we remain calm because we say that everyone is experiencing the same reality. But the fact is there are no vocations. There is a crisis in the decrease in “quantity,” a reduction in numbers. We are pained when we read the statistics of the Congregation and see reflected there a decrease in new members and also see “many missionaries in special situations.” Without a doubt there is a **crisis of quantity with regard to vocations** in the Church as well as in our Congregation, but there is also another crisis that is more frightening to confront, a crisis that can be as terrible as the crisis of quantity and here I refer to the **crisis of quality**. There is a **qualitative decrease in living our lives**. What kind of witness do we give in the Church and in the world when we lack this quality of life, when we are steeped in sadness and depression? What quality of joyful love do we give to the poor or to our confreres?

It is very probable that we ourselves are the cause of our own ill state, the cause of this lack of a qualitative life. We are all responsible for the quality of life of all the members but the primary responsibility for one’s own quality of human and evangelical life lies with ourselves, the most interested and primary beneficiary. Therefore, today each missionary ought to care for his own quality of life.

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<sup>3</sup> SV XI, 412, 17: Conferences to the Missionaries, Extracts from two conferences, numbers 170 and 9. *The priests of the Mission who formerly restored the dead to life, will no longer have anything but the name and appearance of what they once were. They will be only corpses of, and not true, missionaries; they will be corpses of Saint Lazarus and not Lazarus risen from the dead, and still less men who raise others to life* (SV XI, 17; Conferences to the Missionaries, Extract from a Conference, *On Retreats*, (undated).

We have to know how to differentiate between the quality of life in a well-ordered society and the quality of life as expressed in the gospel. The latter one obviously refers to us and involves us in the cultivation of meaning in our life. The ultimate ideal and goal of the quality of gospel life is happiness, total blessedness, and the search for meaning in our vocation. This means that we live this present life with meaning and vitality, without being obsessively dependent on social recognition or apostolic, academic or pastoral achievements.

To live a qualitative life we must live the theological experience, the experience of **FAITH WHICH IS THE TRUE SOURCE** of life that gives **MEANING, DETERMINATION, AND VITALITY** to our life. We should not try to be more pious or devout but rather we should strive to be people of greater faith whose hearts are attached to the plan of life as presented in the gospel. We should strive to live profoundly the gospel with **LOVE and JOY**.

Our faces, our hearts and our lives have lost this joy and happiness and meaning in life. We do not seek refuge in the Lord or in his joy and love but in work, activity and schedules, in our rooms, in our mechanical doing of things and we wait for vocations. We are called to recuperate this quality of interior and exterior life, a quality of life that ought to help us to live our vocation, our community life and our apostolic life in a better way. We look for that quality of evangelical life which places us in the human state that God desires for us.

Furthermore, we have to remember that **our vocation is more than a profession**. We are continually called to follow Jesus Christ evangelizing the poor. We are not simply ecclesiastical functionaries who serve the poor. Therefore there is a difference between the quality of life as seen from the perspective of professional demands and the quality of life as seen from the perspective of our vocation.

In our being as Vincentians, the quality of life ought to be related more with vocational happiness than with professional success, even though it must be said that this professional service or professional competency is not opposed to our vocation. We, however, must be mindful of the fact that we run the risk of substituting one for the other or confusing both of these realities. All of this ought to lead us to an examination of our vocational life. Even though everything seems to be functioning well, at least externally, and everything seems to be renewed, revised and actualized and we and the institution are functioning well, yet as we look at our hearts we realize that our sense of purpose, our zeal and our vitality have been weakened. Thus we feel the quality of our life is not growing and that we have lost our fondness for the newness and fidelity in following Christ.

## The Quality of Our Community Life

*Community life has been a special characteristic of the Congregation and its usual way of living from its very beginning*<sup>4</sup> — this is also a determining factor in the quality of life of the missionaries and a determining factor on the human and evangelical level. To have a qualitative life we need a healthy and sane community, living together as dear friends, a communication that frees us from our loneliness and individualism, a community that gives a witness of love to the poor.

We must humbly recognize that many of our problems, doubts, and crises are the result of an inadequate qualitative community life. We forget the call of our Constitutions *to a wholehearted spirit of renewal*<sup>5</sup> of our community life. At times we become stagnated and unable to be *a sign to the world of the newness of evangelical life*<sup>6</sup> and unable to be that sign to the poor, our lords and masters.

We cannot wait for the quality of life to be fixed by a decree or by the visit of a superior. We cannot sit down and passively wait, with our arms crossed, for a better quality of life to happen. When community life is destroyed, we are destroying ourselves and our Vincentian vocation because we have been called by the Lord to live in community in order to make present the Vincentian ideal of following Jesus Christ evangelizing the poor. To accomplish this we not only need to proclaim the Word, but above all we also need to give witness to our love.

We have to work in solidarity in order to better the quality of our community life. Despite our fragility, limitations, unfaithfulness and failures, we have to struggle with these forces in order to rebuild and raise up our community life, which is one of the fundamental bases of our vocation.

Together with work and human effort we must be able to express compassion, forgiveness, reconciliation, tolerance, education, dialogue and fraternal correction. We must also be mindful of the spiritual power, the theological dimension and ask the Lord for the grace to live as dear friends. Our Founder points out that we ought to pray frequently in order to achieve this quality of life in regard to our community life. This means that we better the quality of our fraternal love so that we not only radiate this love outside the community house toward the poor, but also radiate this love inside our houses, toward our family.

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<sup>4</sup> Constitution 21.

<sup>5</sup> Constitution 19.

<sup>6</sup> Constitution 24.

*I beseech you, Gentlemen, to desire this frequently before God and to desire it for one another, so that all Missionaries may ever love one another. Let us rejoice that we do so now, and pray God not to suffer us ever to relax in the practice of this brotherly love.*<sup>7</sup>

We should not attempt to reduce this invitation to personal prayer or common prayer, which generally is limited to the recitation of the psalms and other prayers in common. It is more than this, more than simply reciting prayers. Also this invitation does not mean that we talk about **spiritual or mystical themes**. Saint Vincent gave a more profound and demanding invitation. We are invited to cultivate this **theological dimension of community**, this dimension of faith that is a fundamental and indispensable requisite when speaking about the quality of life as it applies to our community life and the living of our vocation as missionaries. When this theological foundation is lacking, it becomes difficult to maintain a good quality of evangelical life no matter how much effort we exert with group dynamics, communication techniques, or meetings and gatherings that deal with the theme of community. If this theological foundation is lacking then that which is essential is lacking.

The missionary community that consecrates its whole life to the mission ought to maintain those conditions that enable the cultivation of a qualitative evangelical life and a lively theological dimension. The key to all of this, the decisive step, is the love that characterizes our fraternal relationships. Our Father, Saint Vincent, tells us that this is the practice of fraternal love. This love is what we need in order to live with meaning and vitality, in order to live fully and in order to live a qualitative life. We cannot think that our living together as a gospel community means simply abiding by schedules or certain non-aggression pacts. It does not mean that no one disturbs anyone because everyone is outside the community house and when they are inside, each person is in his own room (which leads to the possibility of isolation). This type of fraternal community would be a minimum, a poverty in community living and not the ideal and therefore would not help us to develop a better qualitative community life.

The key to the theological foundation of our community life is revealed in our Constitutions with great precision. They invite us to see the Blessed Trinity as the **foundation and the principle** of our fraternal life. *The Trinity is the ultimate source of our action and life*<sup>8</sup> and provides us with light so that ***the mystery of the Trinity is***

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<sup>7</sup> SV XII, 266; Conferences to the Missionaries, *On Charity*, 30 May 1659.

<sup>8</sup> Cf., Constitution 20.

***our only theological support.*** Without this solid foundation and without the desire for a continual renewal of our community life, the winds and storms will come and our community houses and life, sustained by human effort and schedules and diagrams, might very well collapse.

### **The Quality of Our Missionary Life**

Our Constitutions state in a very beautiful way who we are: *evangelizing is to be considered its own grace and vocation, and expresses its deepest identity.*<sup>9</sup>

***The mission forms the essential part of our Vincentian vocation.*** Our life without the mission is an empty life, a sad and unhappy life and as a result, a life that lacks meaning and a life that leads to depression because, for a missionary, life without fulfilling the mission would be a life of failure. Our Father, Saint Vincent, tells us that handing ourselves over to the mission is our happiness and our blessing: ***Oh! what a happiness to be a missionary! How happy I am to be of this number.***<sup>10</sup> When our missionary life or our mission is weakened then the quality of life of the members is also weakened and dies.

One of the most serious problems in our missionary life, and a problem that affects the quality of our life, is to confuse our missionary life with the multiplicity of commitments, tasks, and other personal and apostolic activities. We call this ***activism*** and at times we attempt to measure our work and our apostolate by the number of activities or by professional success and efficiency or by the recognition and applause of others.

Another idea that is key to achieving this quality of vocational and missionary life is to have the courage, the boldness and the wisdom to reorganize our ministries. Saint Vincent tells us that in our missionary work it is necessary to know how to reorganize our time in service of the poor in such a way that we are distinguished by our prudence and especially by our apostolic zeal which ought to be prudent.<sup>11</sup> May our pastoral commitments always be mindful of this reality and enable us to question our ministry. Without this perspective we will become tired, weary, and can burn out, which means that we are tired by everything and everyone.

An excessive number of activities and other matters, which we are often called to do and that we also look for, can lead us to an

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<sup>9</sup> Constitution 10.

<sup>10</sup> CCD II, 372.

<sup>11</sup> Cf., CCD X, 539.



unfocused zeal, an activism, a life filled with many things to do, but in the end a life that is empty. We become workaholics and this does not mean that we are good missionaries. This undisciplined and excessive enthusiasm [zeal] is not always supported by authentic gospel motives and when we lack this motivation it can be difficult for our apostolic ministry to contribute to a more qualitative life.

In some cases excessive activism can be a fleeing from some reality, a fleeing from one's self, from an interior life or an escape from community. At times we have had the experience of being light on the street and darkness in our community houses. Also an excessive number of things to do can lead to a breakdown in our spiritual life or in our community relationships, including a breakdown in our missionary ministry that weakens the quality of our life. Our Father, Vincent, warned us about the evil that **undisciplined enthusiasm** [zeal] can cause in our vocation:

*In the same way, all should be on their guard against two further vices, from opposite extremes, both militating against the whole purpose of the Mission. They are all the more dangerous because it is not immediately apparent that they are vices, as they insidiously assume so different an appearance that they are often taken to be real virtues. This pair are laziness and undisciplined enthusiasm... [Undisciplined enthusiasm], masking our self-love or anger, impels us to act harshly towards both sinners and ourselves, and to take on more work than we can manage, even against obedience, resulting in damage to physical and mental health, involving us later in a frantic search for cures, so that we end up sluggish and sensual.<sup>12</sup>*

It is always healthy to dialogue with the Lord, to dialogue in community and to discern the profound motivations of our commitment as missionaries. This enables us to examine whether our motivation is mistaken or not, if we suffer from undisciplined enthusiasm [zeal] or the temptation of selfishness or some compulsive obsession for personal success — all of which can, in time, become a direct attack on the quality of our missionary life. For this reason the quality of our human and evangelical life needs powerful times of prayer and spiritual exercises so that our apostolic ministry does not lose its theological dimension. The ancient monks in the desert referred to this when they spoke about *entering into our inner cell*. Saint Vincent invites us *to be apostles in the countryside and Carthusians in our houses*. A qualitative life implies an inner peace, a fundamental ability to be focused, a joy in being, a joy in

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<sup>12</sup> *Common Rules*, Chapter XII, 11.

life, a joy in our identity and a joy in the ordinary events of our life. In other words, this involves recuperating a way of living among ourselves. If we do not do this, we are allowing our life and our environment to deteriorate. Perhaps we will have silence but it will be an empty silence and there will be no communication with ourselves, God and others. This illness can lead to depression and a lack of meaning and vitality in our life. In summary, if we lack this contemplative and prayerful dimension, this ability to look at our interior life and be Carthusians in our houses, the ability to live with ourselves, with our truth, and reality, we cannot achieve a qualitative missionary life that is so necessary.

### **The Task is in Our Hands**

It is necessary to make every effort to achieve this quality of life in the Congregation of the Mission and to obtain this we need the collaboration of all its members. This is not something that is simply the task of superiors, who are called to animate the community and care for the quality of life in the community and the quality of life of each member. No one can distance himself from this mission and all are needed in order to build new communities and new missionaries. We all ought to feel responsible for one another.

The principal subject of this task is each missionary. Each one of us ought to feel responsible to better the quality of our life. Using the language of Saint Vincent when he wrote to a superior in Sedan in 1644 and spoke about working for one's own perfection in one's vocation: *Here, Monsieur, are the things that concern your vocation and to which alone you should apply yourself: (1) your own perfection; (2) that of your family [community].*<sup>13</sup>

In the first articles of our Common Rules and our present Constitutions, we are called to seek perfection in our vocation because there will be no true missionary work in the new evangelization of the Church unless we ourselves are renewed, new men, new missionaries and unless we are able to better the quality of our vocational, community, and missionary life. This is the search for perfection in our vocation.

A static, mechanical, insipid missionary life, a missionary life that lacks vision and joy and dynamism does not help us to be effective evangelizers of the poor. This is the call of our founder when he speaks to us about going to minister to the poor, but *with a love that is always new, always renewed*. He is not only speaking

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<sup>13</sup> CCD II, 495.

about a love that is large in quantity: *Therefore let us go forth and be concerned about this new love in our ministry with the poor.*<sup>14</sup>

This new love, this renewed vocation and qualitative life in our being and doing is not some form of utopia. It can become a reality if we are able to commit ourselves to living our Constitutions and Statutes. Saint Vincent has exhorted us to love these documents, to study them and fulfill them because they provide us with the necessary light that enables us to walk along the path of new love, renewed in our ministry with the poor. They not only point out the path that we must travel but also point out how we must travel. In the Constitutions and the Statutes we find the fundamentals, the discipline and the balance for our vocation that enable us to be true contemplatives in action and that also enable us to obtain a better qualitative vocational, community and missionary life and ultimately enable us to be effective ministers of the Good News that is proclaimed to the poor.

This new love and this qualitative renewed vocational life will become a reality in our lives when we dare to project this in clear, bold and creative commitments, making these commitments in appropriate ways so that our words are not carried away by the wind. For this reason we see that our Provincial Norms, our *Ratio Formationis*, our plans for Ongoing Formation, our Provincial Plans and especially the plans of the local communities must seek ways to take on commitments that generate true life, a better qualitative life for each one of their members, committing ourselves to healthy schedules, balancing times for prayers and work, times for Martha and Mary, times for rest and recreation, respecting personal and community time, trying to create in our communities an atmosphere of family and not one of an office or a storeroom. We must avoid the temptation to seek for things outside the community and then take refuge in our rooms. The culture that surrounds the table and meals is not simply a time to satisfy ourselves, but is also a time to gather together with our brothers and share our life and ministry. In this way we, as individuals and as a community, attempt to seek a more qualitative life in order to have a regimen of healthy life that enables us to give a new and renewed love to the poor.

This new and renewed love, this more qualitative vocational Vincentian lifestyle will be possible if we radically and profoundly live out the following of Jesus Christ, servant of the poor. If we lose the strength, the enthusiasm, and the vision of this following of Christ then our vocational life will qualitatively decrease and

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<sup>14</sup> SV XI, 393; Conferences to the Missionaries, Extract from a Conference, *On the Love of the Poor*, January 1657.

diminish. This call to live a qualitative missionary life invites us to move to the center of our lives, to the place where we make decision, because we are unable to grow or become better without a clear process of conversion of our hearts, a process that moves from recognizing our own crises to a desire for a profound transformation of our heart, a desire to evangelize ourselves so that we are born anew. We will achieve this to the degree that we open ourselves to the Spirit of God and become converted into living missionaries and are no longer merely corpses of missionaries.

(CHARLES T. PLOCK, C.M., translator)