

STUDY

350th Anniversary of the Delivery of the Common Rules

Drawing Up the Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission

by Bernard Jean Koch, C.M.

When and how were the Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission drawn up; by Monsieur Vincent alone or with his confreres?

If one confines oneself to the statements of St. Vincent, such as his Introduction to the 1658 edition and in the Conference of 17 May 1658, at the handing over of these Rules to the Community (COSTE, SV XII, 5-10), they were long desired and expected, and yet, he had not thought of it: "This came together by itself, little by little, one after the other" (COSTE, SV XII, 9). He added, however, "it has been a good thirty years or so since God gave a beginning to the Company and since that time, one has lived by these Rules which we are going to give now."

So, what about the composition, the writing, of the Common Rules? Is it really so late, or does it not seem earlier? And then, is it by Monsieur Vincent alone?

Study of what has come down to us of the early texts is going to show us primarily that Vincent spoke the simple truth: they had always applied them essentially, even if the details were added gradually, with the increase in the number of confreres, the activities of the houses, and as the human aspects and the theological foundations were developed further. From the beginning there was

an organization of community life, in consultation certainly with his companions, as he always did afterwards.

We will also see that this study confirms what other documents show of Vincent: one of his characteristics is that of being emotional and impassioned, but he is also very rational and an organizer, quick and patient at the same time, a gradualist. He knows 'to see' and to put in order, little by little perfecting the organization, according to its experience. He has simultaneously the principles of farming and a great concern for the land, for experience, for adaptability to realities and needs. In the beginning, he happened to be in a hurry, to go too fast, which got him into trouble and into court, as in 1611 and in the years that followed, on account of the Abbey of Saint-Léonard-de-Chaumes, near La Rochelle. But he knew how to learn lessons from these failures, to take something positive from these misfortunes or mistakes. We find echoes of them in his correspondence and in his Conferences. He did not invent charity, he knew how to organize it. As soon as he begins or is in contact with a work, he introduces organization and supervises it in consultation, as with the Confraternity of Charity in Chatillon in 1617. We have a magnificent example of this in 1621 in Mâcon, where the Association of Charity had already been in existence since 1610, and which the needy were exploiting. In fifteen days he managed to improve the organization and introduce supervision, home visitation and a Mass every Sunday adapted to the poor. (Unfortunately, one can only obtain these 12 documents, of which 9 were unknown until now, by e-mail. Coste only has three of them.)

We are going to see numerous stages in the drawing up of the Common Rules. Most of the documents prior to publication in 1658 have disappeared, only five remain from the beginning: an *Order of Day*, a *Rule of the Congregation of the Mission*, *Notices* from the annual retreats of 1632 and 1635 and a summary of *Our Little Way of Life* in a letter of 14 July 1639 to Mother Jeanne de Chantal. Then we have the manuscript of 1653 of the *Rules of the Congregation of the Mission* following several *Rules*, found in Sarzana in 1957 and published in 1991, with some fairly important differences compared to the 1658 text, for example the exemption from the recitation of the Office without chant. The sentence "exceptions to this would be houses where we are bound to Gregorian chant because of obligations accepted, or students preparing to receive orders, or seminaries for diocesan students and other suchlike commitments" from chapter ten, paragraph five of the 1658 text is not in the Sarzana Codex. (The English language version of this quotation is from *Constitutions and Statutes of the Congregation of the Mission*, Rome 1984 and Philadelphia 1989, p. 140.)

The other stages are known from other documents, statements of Father Vincent and letters to confreres recounting where they are but without the texts themselves

In following the chronology of the documents which are still with us, we will witness the **evolution of the Common Rules**, the gradual development of various points and the clarification of their writing, even if the contents of many texts are no longer accessible to us, the documents having disappeared. This work will be fruitful in order to see that the Common Rules of 1658 are not a meteor fallen from the sky, but the fulfilment of thirty two years of life, from 1626, the collaboration of the first four missionaries.

Father Vincent had already certainly proposed an organization of life and work to his small number of occasional associates from 1618. After the Congregation was established at the end of 1626, we will notice that there were early texts which, if not official, were at least public, by word of mouth and certainly in writing in some documents prior to 1632, fragments of which we find in the *Conferences* after 1632, and a half finished draft from 1642, which has not come down to us.

Moreover, it is necessary to know that **these texts** are not his work alone, **they were worked and reworked by several people, then by the Assemblies General and the Commissions**, just as had been the case at Châtillon in 1617 and as it was with the Daughters of Charity.

Here is the list, as complete as possible, of the stages, with a very brief outline of their content.

1617 – 24 November:

The Rule of the Confraternity of Charity at Chatillon. Three virtues are to be found there already: humility, simplicity, charity, and some features of a *RULE OF LIFE* (*Vincent De Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 13b, pp. 8-22, New York, New City Press, 2003).

This was closely followed by other Rules, adapted to different places and circumstances and therefore, some are very different and others similar enough.

From **1618**:

There were the basics certainly, even before the bringing together of the missionaries as a Congregation, because Vincent, while not wishing to presume on providence, did not like improvisation either and was worried about organization. We can conclude from

examining the *Rules* and his various *Confraternities of Charity* that as he proposed this to their members, he certainly proposed it to his first colleagues, very briefly, as later with all his works.

1625 – 17 April:

Contract of Foundation of the Congregation of the Mission. The fundamental doctrines are written down: **Incarnation, life and death of Jesus Christ, love of the Blessed Mother** (*Vincent De Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 13a, p. 214, New York, New City Press, 2003), as well as a few *Rules* for life in common, missions and time for rest, with a Rule and under a Superior, **‘These said ecclesiastics will live in common under obedience to M. De Paul... under the name of Company, Congregation, Confraternity of the Fathers or Priests of the Mission.** — That those who will be admitted subsequently to the said work will be obliged to have the intention of serving God in it in the above mentioned manner and **to observe the rule that will be drawn up among them concerning it’** (the English language version of this quotation is based on the translation of the Foundation Contract of the Congregation which appears in *Vincent De Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 13a, p. 216, New York, New City Press, 2003).

A foundational document, it shows that from this moment Father Vincent is the Superior and that there will be a Rule. We can infer from this that, beforehand, Vincent also held the role of organizer and leader among his colleagues on a more or less temporary basis.

1626 – 4 September:

Act of Association of the First Missioners, Vincent De Paul, François du Coudray, Antoine Portail, Jean de la Salle, ‘we [Vincent de Paul] in virtue of the above, **after having seen proof, for a considerable period of time,** of the virtue and ability of François du Coudray, priest..., of Maître Antoine Portail, priest..., and of Maître Jean de la Salle, also a priest... we have chosen..., and associate to ourselves and to the aforesaid work, **to live together as a Congregation, Company or Confraternity,** and to devote ourselves to the salvation of the poor country people, in conformity with the foundation and in accord with the request that du Coudray, Portail and la Salle have made to us, **promising to observe the foundation and the special regulations that will be drawn up in accord with it, and to obey us and our successors in the office of Superior,** as being subject to our

direction, leadership and jurisdiction...’ (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 13a, p. 222 ff.).

This is a foundational document also, the *Contract of Foundation* and this *Act of Association* shows that from this moment Father Vincent is the Superior, that there was a period of probation, a sort of novitiate, and that there was going to be a Rule.

1628, or 1629 – 9 September:

Father Vincent and a few confreres make their vows, in private, which they renew in the following two or three years, then a few other confreres make them; later they make it a rule. (COSTE, SV V, 445-456 and note 1). The vows **will never appear in the Common Rules**.

1631 – Date not specified:

Father Vincent works to have the Congregation approved by the Pope, and **a letter** to François du Coudray, in Rome, for him to ask the Pope to approve the Congregation, shows him to be concerned to ‘live in a congregation and observe five things,’ being at the same time dependent on the bishops to be sent on mission (*Vincent De Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 1, pp. 112-113, New York, New City Press, 1985).

Between **1627** and **1633**:

First preserved outlines of an order of day and spirit: a **Schedule of the Day**, then a **Rule of the Congregation of the Mission**, in a copy found by Fr John Rybolt in 2006 documents that came from a Benedictine house.

1632 – month and day not given:

During the annual retreat, Father Vincent made a series of announcements which are fragments of a *Rule of Life* and which presuppose an established practice. Several sentences or ideas remain in the final *Rules* (COSTE, SV XI, 100-102).

1633 – 12 January:

Bull of Erection of the Congregation of the Mission. (The text says 1632, but it is a Roman document, where the year only began on March 1). **The theological foundations** are completed; HOLY TRINITY, INCARNATION, VIRGIN MARY (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 13a, p. 298), and they refer to **the ends of the institute, the people** who compose it and **their responsibilities**, an outline of the first chapter of the *Rules* published in 1658,

with some wording which will be taken up again in these *Rules* (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 13a, pp. 298-299). Moreover, the Pope gives his authority to the Archbishop of Paris for complete approval (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 13a, p. 302).

Around **1634**:

'More than twenty-five years before his death,' says Abelly (I, 252) Father Vincent writes to a confrere, after having been dangerously ill, that his only regret, if he was to die, would be the fact that we have not yet drawn up our *Rules* (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 1, pp. 272-273).

1635:

During the annual retreat, a new series of *announcements*, which, for the most part are found in the final version of the Rules (COSTE, SV XI, 103-104).

1636:

We still have a *Rule for the Chaplains to the Army*. We find there six virtues: charity, fervour (which he uses in conjunction with 'zeal'), mortification, obedience, patience, modesty (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 13a, p. 308). Humility, simplicity and meekness are missing to make up the five virtues peculiar to the missionary.

1638 – 29 October:

Chapter, and **Conference**, 17 December. **Chapter**: the fact of holding these exercises, and their contents, show that there already was a *Rule of Life*, which contains some features. This will be attested to by a letter that follows six months after (COSTE, SV XI, 105-112).

1639 – 14 July:

A revealing text: he writes to Mother de Chantal, 'what constitutes our humble way of life,' and later, '[we]... try to live in a religious manner, even though we are not religious.' On Fridays, '**a conference on our rules and... the virtues**' (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 1, pp. 552-557).

1640 – 14 November:

To Louis Lebreton, in Rome: he writes that he is **working**, '**on our little Rules**' and on the question of the vows (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 2, p. 155).

He will recall this work on 11 August 1651, in the approval of the *Rules* by the Assembly (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 13a, p. 396).

1641 – 19 October:

The Archbishop of Paris, Jean-François de Gondi, **approves the vows** (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 13a, pp. 315-317, cf. Vol. 5, pp. 318 and 463). They were **never** inserted **in the Common Rules**.

1642 – 19 January:

Chapter, Father Vincent recalls that, ‘we must have great feeling to make us faithful to the **daily reading of a chapter of the New Testament** and, from the beginning, to effect action, etc.’ (COSTE, SV XI, 112-113).

– 19 February:

Conference, where he says it is necessary, ‘to be in constant mortification, the missionary in particular.’ It was, therefore, already resolved (COSTE, SV XI, 113-114).

– 29 February:

Father Vincent and several confreres **make vows together** at Saint Lazare (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 5, p. 318 and Note 9).

– 18 March:

Repetition of Prayer, on obedience and humility. This shows the practice of Repetition of Prayer, and confirms the presence of the virtues (COSTE, SV XI, 114).

– 21 March:

Conference on restraint and silence at table, a new example of instructions already in force (COSTE, SV XI, 115).

– 27 June:

Conference on the union between the houses of the Company, another element already anticipated, and which shows us **one of the reasons why Father Vincent valued the Rules**. Experience showed him that, on the one hand, quite a lot of colleagues had forsaken the Mission and, occasionally, were still leaving it, and on the other hand, from one house to another people criticized easily, — otherwise he would not have insisted on unity so much that day, nor said that he was going to consider communications by letter, so as to encourage it, because sharing news helps unity, asking only that they be shown to the Superior (COSTE, SV XI, 120-124).

– 20 July:

Conference on Silence, in words and in actions (COSTE, SV XI, 124-125).

– 13-17 October:

Beginning of the **FIRST GENERAL ASSEMBLY. The work on the Rules is ready and Father Vincent presents ‘the draft of the Rules’** so that it may be discussed. This draft has disappeared, it seems (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 13a, p. 325).

– 17 October:

Given the great number of comments on these drafts, the work is handed over to a Commission of four confreres (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 13a, p. 326).

– 24 October:

Father Vincent writes to Bernard Codoing in Rome and makes him a member of the Assembly: ‘We reviewed the Rules we had drawn up... I shall send you all this so that you may give us your opinion of it. We did not introduce anything new, or very little, except to give some Assistants to the General...’ (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 2, pp. 343-344).

To say, ‘we did not introduce anything new, or very little...’ shows that this version of the **Rules** only codifies what was already in practice. The text has not come down to us. It must not have been very different from the final text, in spite of the numerous minor comments of this commission until 1651.

The official Rules are on their way; from now on it will be useless to cite the Conferences here.

1643 – 30 January:

Father Vincent sets to work on a **review of the Rules**, as he writes to Bernard Codoing, Superior in Rome, and he will send them to him afterwards, for approval undoubtedly (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 2, p. 396).

1644 – 29 July:

Pope Urban VIII dies. It seems that this will facilitate the process.

– 12 August:

Father Vincent uses ‘this time of change’ to ask Bernard Codoing, in Rome, to bring ‘some pressure to bear... **for the confirmation of our Rules**, with a revocation of the prerogative which [was] given in them to the Archbishop of Paris’ [Jean-François de Gondy] (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 2, p. 523).

– 11 November:

He is still trying to **have them approved in Paris**, and asks Jean Dehorgny, who replaced Bernard Codoing in Rome, to see what he can do there (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 2, p. 540).

1646 – Around May:

Advice to two missionaries leaving for Algiers (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 13a, p. 344).

– 22 July:

Father Vincent **writes to Antoine Portail**, approving the ‘**three little remarks**’ that he noted, ‘regarding **the authority of local Superiors**’ (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 2, p. 668).

On the same day, without referring to the work on the rules, he discusses the regulation of visits with Fr. Jean Bourdet (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 2, pp. 670-673).

– 12 August:

Two things conveyed to Antoine Portail, who is making a canonical visitation to Richelieu: **1.** to tell him again, concerning our *Rules*, ‘what you told me should be changed... since I could not give it the requisite attention at the time you informed me about it, and now I would find it difficult to make the change myself’ (we clearly sense his respect for the opinions of a member of the revising commission). **2.** ‘**The Coadjutor** (Jean-François-Paul de Gondi, the nephew of Archbishop Jean-François de Gondi) **is going to work on it. He now has the authority to approve our Rules**, being the Archbishop’s Vicar during his absence.’ We become aware of the interplay of different personalities, even in ecclesiastical affairs: if the uncle refuses, the nephew will say yes; but the uncle will remain Archbishop until his death in 1654! (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 3, p. 11).

– 6 October:

To Antoine Portail again, who at this time is making a canonical visitation to La Rose: **I think we shall have no difficulty changing** what Father Dehorgny (another member of the commission) and you judge appropriate to change **in the functions...** I will continue to pressure the Coadjutor, who is very slow getting things done’ (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 3, pp. 83-84).

1647 – 20 September:

To Antoine Portail, who is making canonical visitations in Italy: that he be satisfied with six days to **review our Rules** with Fathers Dehorgny and Alméras, and return to France (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 3, p. 238).

1648 – 14 February:

It is interesting to note also that profession of faith in rejecting haste of which Father Vincent writes to Antoine Portail, concerning the regulation of the hospital for the galley slaves, in Marseilles, 'that a good maxim for those whom God uses to establish holy and new works is to defer as long as possible making the regulations. Experience teaches that what is feasible at the beginning is sometimes harmful as things go on, or subject to troublesome inconveniences' (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 3, p. 272). We appreciate his wisdom, linked to his concern for experience, for verification on the ground.

– 23 October:

To René Alméras, in Rome: 'As for the *Rules*, Monsieur, I think **you must begin to get them approved...**' (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 3, p. 373).

1651 – 21 July - 9 August:

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY Revises the RULE. It was agreed that only two or three would re-examine the *Rules*, but that all would sign (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 13a, pp. 370-371 & 394-395).

– 11 August:

Signing of the **ACT OF APPROBATION OF THE Common Rules** by the Assembly. This declares that they are suited to our way of life and the end of the Congregation, and **were in practice for around twenty-five years**, that is to say since 1626, from the beginning! And Vincent will come back to this on 17 May 1658 — after thirty-three years or so (COSTE, SV XII, 5-6).

The Approbation of the Rules, in fact, requires the approval of the Archbishop (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 13a, pp. 395-397).

So, it is clear that **the Company possesses its own Rules**, and practically a final text. Unfortunately, the only text that has survived officially is that of 1642 but this is perhaps the same version as the Sarzana Codex of 1653.

The hardest part remains to be done: to obtain the approval of the Archbishop, and then of Rome.

1652 – 21 June:

Relations with Archbishop Jean-François de Gondi, uncle of Jean-François-Paul de Gondi, the future Archbishop and Cardinal de Retz, must have cooled, because Father Vincent writes to Lambert aux Couteaux, in Warsaw, **that he did not dare to ask him for a testimonial letter for the confreres** (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 4, p. 398).

1653 – 23 August:

In spite of this, the Archbishop of Paris approves the Vows of the Congregation once again, confirming the approval of 1641 (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 13a, p. 315). We no longer have this document, only the reference Father Vincent makes to it in a study on the vows, between 1653 and 1655 (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 13a, p. 403), and in a long letter of 19 February 1655 (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 5, p. 317). He makes it clear there that the power of the Archbishop has the authority of the Pope, since the *Bull* erecting the company in 1633, renewed in 1641 and 1653 (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 13a, p. 302).

The Same Day – 23 August: the Archbishop's secretary authenticates **a copy of the Common Rules**, the *Rules of the Vows* and other *particular Rules*. Those **Common Rules** were probably the same text as the **Codex, a manuscript from 1653**, found at **Sarzana** in 1957 by M. Angelo Coppo and published by Father John Rybolt in *Vincentiana* (1991, 4-5).

1654:

The Rules are finally approved by the Archbishop. We no longer have this document; Father Coste was, therefore, unable to publish it. St. Vincent refers to it in his letter to Etienne Blatiron on 19 February 1655 (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 5, p. 321). Was the delay in the approval due to the Archbishop's opposition to one or other article? Fr. Pierre Coste thought so (*Monsieur Vincent II*, 10).

– 21 March:

The Archbishop dies. His nephew, Jean-François-Paul, imprisoned at Vincennes because he took part in the Fronde, **succeeds him**, by a proxy, who takes possession one hour afterwards, thwarting the machinations of the Court (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 5, p. 115 & Note 4).

1654-1655: FIRST EDITION OF THE COMMON RULES.

1655 – 12 March:

Father Vincent writes to Charles Ozenne, in Warsaw: ‘There are some printing errors in our *Rules*, so we will have to have them reprinted. Then, and not before, I will send you a copy; **we have not yet distributed any.**’ And Father Vincent added four lines that were deleted (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 5, p. 334 & Note 7). A **complete revision** is going to be necessary, therefore.

1656 – 22 April:

To Donat Crowley, Superior at Le Mans, concerning the admission of a postulant: ‘As for the *Rules*, however, they are not in a state to be shown to others; we are working on them because something has come up obliging us to revise them. As soon as they are in the proper form, you will be one of the first to whom we will send them’ (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 5, p. 600). Was the ‘something’ the death of the Archbishop, allowing the drawing up of one point or other as required, as Father Coste supposed? (*Monsieur Vincent* II, 10). Or was it the printing errors discovered in March?

1657 – 22 June:

The process to obtain the approval of the Holy Father continues in Rome, and Father Vincent writes to Edme Jolly, Superior in Rome, clarifying the two powers of attorney he received for that purpose, mentioning to ‘*acquiesce*’ to the changes the Holy Father chooses to make in our *Rules*’ (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 6, p. 349).

– 6 July:

Father Vincent sends Father Jolly, ‘**a few new observations we made on them, put in order by M. Portail**’ (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 6, p. 366).

– 20 July:

The exchange of letters on the subject continues (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 6, pp. 385-387).

– 7 September:

To Edme Jolly again: ‘As for the approval of the changes to be made in our *Rules*... God, however, has provided an opportunity allowing us to have recourse to the master himself (the Archbishop of Paris, Jean-François-Paul de Gondi, Cardinal de Retz?); we will try to avail ourselves of it’ (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 6, p. 459).

It seems it was not only a question of simple printing errors, but that there were issues to discuss with the authorities....

– 5 October:

Still to Edme Jolly, in Rome: **‘Thank you for the observations you sent me on our Rules....** We are going to put those same **Rules** in good order so they can be sent as soon as possible to the commissioner’ (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 6, p. 459).

– 12 October:

A new letter to Edme Jolly tells us that copies of the earlier Rules still existed because he approves of having given ‘only the old Rules to those Bishops who requested them’ in order to set up a seminary for the foreign missions (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 6, p. 541). But what were these earlier *Rules*? Those of 1642? Or the 1654-1655 edition? The text has not come down to us.

– 2 November:

Everything has collapsed. Father Vincent writes to Father Jolly: ‘I say nothing to you about the business of our *Rules*; Father Portail’s illness has caused us to put everything on hold’ (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 6, p. 594).

– 14 November:

Have things sorted themselves out? Father Vincent writes to Louis Dupont, the Superior in Tréguier: ‘I will have the Rules of the Mission sent to you.’ Unless this is not about the Common Rules but about the Rules of the Offices of the Mission? (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 6, p. 615).

There is lack of documents from this point, letters as well as official papers. If the Rules were approved, we have neither text nor document, nor any letters that speak of it; one should know that the greater part of the letters of Saint Vincent disappeared in the sacking of Saint Lazare on 13 July 1789.

In fact everything must have sorted itself out, **the Rules** were undoubtedly approved by the Archbishop, because **the printing of the final text could proceed.**

1658 – in May – **Publication of the Final Text of the Common Rules**

THE DEDICATORY LETTER, in the preface in the book of the *Common Rules*, and in COSTE, SV VII, 148-151, **‘Here at last... are the Common Rules** or *Constitutions* of our Congregation’ (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 7, p. 163).

– 17 May:

Conference during which Father Vincent presents the Rules, then distributes them (COSTE, SV XII, 1-14, especially 5-10) making it clear that **they had been in practice for thirty-three years** (COSTE, SV XII, 5-6).

Then: **Publication in French** — first mention on 2 October (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 7, p. 296).

End of May: and at least until November — copies are sent to the houses (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 7, pp. 179, 180, 182, 271, 289, 291, **296**, 323, 331, 373). Father Vincent insists that they are not passed to anyone outside the Community (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 7, p. 180).

– 6 December:

Father Vincent begins the series of **Conferences on the explanation of the Rules**, article by article (COSTE, SV XII, 73). The poor state of his legs and of his health will oblige him to interrupt them a year later; the last will be on 19 December 1659 (COSTE, SV XII, 424).

1659 – 7 March:

At the Conference, on **Chapter II, article 3**, Father Vincent pointed out **a mistake by the printer** (COSTE, SV XII, 151).

No correction was made in the French editions, not even in 1984, in the edition inserted in the *Constitutions and Statutes*.

– 4 April:

Father Vincent continues the process of seeking the approval of the Pope; he writes to Edme Jolly, Superior in Rome: 'We are going to send our *Rules* to the Apostolic Commissary through an address we have for the approval of agreements' (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 7, p. 497). We do not know if such an approval was given.

– 15 July:

Father Vincent **requests the Archbishop**, Cardinal de Retz, Jean-François-Paul de Gondi, then in exile somewhere unknown, **to once again approve the Rules**. He adds, 'we have been obliged to alter some, [both] because of errors that slipped into the written form and because we had made regulations about certain things which experience has shown us to be difficult in practice. Be that as it may, Monseigneur, we have made no change in the essence of the *Rules* nor in any important detail. I assure Your Eminence of this in the sight of God, before whom I must appear to give an account of the actions of my poor, wretched life, since

I am now in my seventy-ninth year' (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 8, pp. 33-34).

This confirms that there was not only an issue with printing mistakes.

This text also confirms that he was not born in 1576 but in 1581, since at 78, he is in his 79th year.

We do not know if this letter got to its addressee.

CONCLUSION

This long examination of texts may seem boring. Pierre Coste knew how to present them more attractively in his *M. Vincent, le grand saint du Grand Siècle* (II, pp. 7-11). But thanks to this we see better, perhaps, to trace **the long term** work that was the development of a way of life, then a guiding text.

It is striking to see also that **it is not the work of only one man**, a lawmaker in the chamber, but the **concerted work of a whole community, that wants to show what shapes its life**, its missionary life filled with God, with Jesus Christ.

In the end, it is good to **be aware of all the difficulties they had to overcome**, and how much the delay was not only the fruit of a calm patience, but of the acceptance of obstacles that arose one after the other and of the effort to overcome them. In fact, Vincent would have liked very much to publish the *Rules* after 1642, but he accepted the long delay that circumstances and human resistance imposed upon him, and he knew how to interpret it in faith.

Every chapter of the *Common Rules* of the Congregation of the Mission contains some expression of the theological and scriptural foundations of the spiritual life of the missionaries, some practices being applicable in every era and culture, and other practices more tied to one era and culture. Sometimes these are present in the paragraphs expressing the first two aspects, and are therefore to be adapted.

Remember the foundations, that is to say, all of chapter II, chapter X, 1-12 and 20-21, then the applications, chapter III, 1-7, all of chapter V, 1-9, VI, VII with nuances, but noting the tone of respect and prudence, chapter IX, 1-6, 9-10, 16, chapter XI, 1-6, 8-12, all of chapter XII, also full of practical wisdom. The fundamental points are II, 1-3 and X, 1-4. The other paragraphs come under the third aspect, purely practical and open to modification.

Many practical details no longer reflect the ways of our society (that Superiors open letters... that one go out with a companion...),

and besides these safeguards were not necessarily entirely effective. But most of the articles in the early chapters retain their full value, and if the new Constitutions are inserted as an appendix to these *Common Rules*, it is because Vincentians are still nourished by them, re-reading them often (say every three months) not as a legal text either, but as a **GREAT SPIRITUAL TEXT**, for the same reasons as the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius or every other spiritual treatise **with the remarks that Saint Vincent made in them**, as far as chapter V, 3.

It is good, however, in interpreting them correctly, to grasp the meaning of some words that no longer have the same connotation at all today, like *simplicity* and especially *indifference* (chapter II, 10), which now means a lack of interest, disdain, but which still had its original sense of loving all, being interested in everything that arises, 'without distinction.'

To meditate on them, to go deeper into them, especially their fundamental points of doctrine will make it clear how detrimental it would be to allow this text, which gave life to so many zealous priests and brothers for three centuries, lapse from memory, into indifference, this text which communicates the synthesis of Saint Vincent's spirituality.

What Father Vincent wrote to Louis Rivet on 3 June, or 20 October 1658, is what he still says today: in observing them, 'all of us will be sanctified in this, especially since they contain what Our Lord did and what he wants us to do' (*Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 7, pp. 182 & 323). These two passages go hand in hand, the text of p. 182 is only an extract of p. 323.

Translation: PASCHAL SCALLON, C.M.