

STUDY

350th Anniversary of the Delivery of the Common Rules

Upright Community Living Among Ourselves

The Community in the Common Rules

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0. Introduction

Community Life, in its conception and as the expression of the relationships of obedience towards our superiors and charity with our brothers, is without a doubt one of the aspects of our life which has evolved the most since the Common Rules were handed out on May 17, 1658.

St. Vincent lived, reflected and wrote from his own human and theological formation. He was a child of his times, as we say. He was influenced by his environment. He learned from those whom he considered his teachers and was attentive to the manifestations of God's will in daily events and in the opinions of those who shared with him a unique concern for the building up of the Kingdom of God. Three and a half centuries of reflection by the Church, illuminated by the Spirit of the Lord, which culminated in the Theology of the Church in Vatican II and which has been continued in the post-conciliar theological reflection, gives us a very different perspective from which to consider the same realities and concepts that St. Vincent expounded in the Common Rules. If we illuminate these realities and concepts in the light of later reflection by the Church we can find values which St. Vincent and his contemporaries

could not discover. We can almost dare to speak of a latent sense of the Common Rules which only comes to light in later reflections. This happens to us, I would say above all, with the reality of the Community. Although we can presume that clearly the missionaries lived in a community, the word community itself hardly appears in the entire text of the Common Rules. Reference is made to things placed in common (*in communi deposita*)¹ for the service of each one as might be necessary. It says that Our Lord called together the Apostles and Disciples and gave them norms so that they could live well together (*congregasset in unum, nonnulla recte inter se convivendi praecepta ipsis tradit*)² and we are assured that a community given to God (*ut comunitas Deo dicata*)³ cannot persevere without a rule of silence. These are the three closest references to the concept of community. In the new Constitutions and Statutes, on the other hand, the word community appears forty-four times, to which we can add seven more where the word appears in the plural.

These reflections wish to indicate the fact that in the Common Rules, although the concept of community is not found with precision and its development has been acquired from later Church reflection, some elements, which we consider today to be constitutive of it, are already suggested and other well developed. I do not mean that everything is already said in the Common Rules, but rather that something of what we talk about today on this topic we find already pointed to, in some cases with great clarity, in the text of the Common Rules. This is the continuity which we reclaim today from the Common Rules. Although they have no juridical value, they can still continue to give a strong impulse to the fidelity of the Congregation of the Mission and to each one of its members in a Community for Mission in the Church.

1. A Community of the Disciples of Christ

From the first number of the Constitutions it appears very clearly that the proper condition of a missionary is that of being a follower of Jesus Christ, *the first missionary sent to the world to save the human race*.⁴ Having pointed out this goal of the Incarnation, the end of the Congregation and of each of its members is concretized in continuing the mission of Jesus Christ: To do what he did and to do

¹ R.C. III, 6.

² R.C. VIII, 1.

³ R.C. VIII, 4.

⁴ R.C. I, 1.

it as he did it. *This little Congregation wishes to imitate, as much as its meager resources allow, Christ, the Lord in his virtues and in works directed towards the salvation of the neighbor.*⁵

Imitation or Following

A lot has been written about the differences that can exist between imitating and following. The supporters of the first word appeal to the traditional literature of the Church which has used the word imitate or imitators to designate the best followers of Jesus Christ. They never thought that by being imitators of Jesus Christ they were contemplating the master as a reality far away and different, like a bad copy of the original work of art which it reproduces. Rather they thought about Jesus Christ in terms of a close relationship, of participating in his spirit, in communion. What they sought to achieve was that Christ might live in them as St. Paul said. The supporters of using the word following say that it better signifies the closeness, the interiority of actions which are not limited to being copies of something external, but which are born from the conviction that they walk in the footsteps of Christ. If we remain with the surface of the image, both imitating and following will seem insufficient because neither the copy can be identified with the model nor what follows with what has preceded. What is meant is a continuity, a presence from knowledge and love which St. Paul expressed as *I live, not I; it is Christ who lives in me.*⁶

St. Vincent, in keeping with the tone of the literature of his time, used in the Common Rules the word imitate, but he deepened its meaning with images of putting on the armor of Jesus Christ,⁷ or putting on the spirit of Jesus Christ,⁸ by which he was proposing that Christ continues to live and act in the life of the missionaries who have been chosen as *instruments through which the Son of God continues to do what he did on earth.*⁹

Putting on the spirit of Jesus Christ,¹⁰ a task which has to be undertaken as the most urgent for a missionary, demands a

⁵ R.C. I, 1.

⁶ Galt 2:20.

⁷ Cf. R.C. II, 18.

⁸ Cf. R.C. I, 3.

⁹ SVP.ES XI, 387; SV XII, 80.

¹⁰ On this theme, look at HERMINIO ANTONELLO, "Put on the Spirit of Jesus Christ," in the *Thought of Saint Vincent*, VINCENZIANA, Year 52, n. 3, May-Jun 2008, pp. 170-186.

restructuring of thinking and feeling and acting so that, overcoming all natural tendencies or the invitations of the world, the missionary is converted into an expression of the thinking, feeling and acting of Jesus Christ. *Remember, Monsieur*, he wrote to Fr. Portail, *we live in Jesus Christ through the death of Jesus Christ; and we must die in Jesus Christ through the life of Jesus Christ; and our life must be hidden in Jesus Christ and filled with Jesus Christ; and in order to die as Jesus Christ, we must live as Jesus Christ.*¹¹ And, without leaving the text of the Common Rules, we find that for St. Vincent putting on the spirit of Jesus Christ consists in living faithfully the Rules because they describe for us the feeling, thinking and acting of Jesus Christ which should be reproduced by a missionary. The spirit of Jesus Christ *which shines above all in the evangelical maxims, in his poverty, chastity and obedience; in his modesty; in the lifestyle which he taught his disciples; in the daily living; in the daily practices of piety; in the missions and other activities which he had with people.*¹² St. Vincent has enumerated each and every chapter of the Common Rules. For him to live them with authenticity is to live by putting on the spirit of Jesus Christ. That is why he could say *Jesus Christ is the Rule of the Mission.*¹³

To do what he did and to do it as he did it is what the Common Rules ask of us. In them we contemplate Jesus Christ from the particular perspective of the unique participation in the spirit of Jesus Christ which St. Vincent de Paul received in the grace of his vocation. From this perspective a special Christian following is adapted by those who feel called to continue the mission of Jesus Christ, evangelizing the poor as Vincent de Paul did. In Chapter Two, On the Evangelical Maxims, this specialness is described like this: *All of these evangelical maxims, which we have been talking about up to here, should be observed as well as we can, since they are holy and useful. But, some of them are even more important for us, in a special way those that refer to simplicity, humility, meekness, mortification and zeal. In the cultivation and practice of these virtues, the Congregation has to carefully dedicate itself, since these five virtues are like the faculties of the soul of the whole Congregation and should inspire all of our actions.*¹⁴

¹¹ SVP.ES I, 320; SV I, 295; SVP I, 276.

¹² R.C. I, 3.

¹³ SVP.ES XI, 429; SV XII, 130.

¹⁴ R.C. II, 14.

Dynamic Following

The following of Jesus Christ acquires in the Common Rules a dynamic manifestation which St. Vincent managed to express in the seal and motto which he left us as an inheritance: Christ walking on the globe, crowned by the gospel text: *Evangelizare pauperibus misisit me.*¹⁵ The path of the Congregation is a missionary road in following Jesus Christ who *went from town to town, teaching in the synagogues, proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom and healing from every sickness and pain.*¹⁶ This has to be, according to the Common Rules, the proper function of the missionary priests whom the brothers assist according to their own condition.¹⁷ The missionary needs to be moved by the dynamism of the spirit, since the five virtues by which the Congregation tries to express its spirit¹⁸ are *like the five smooth stones of David, with which, wounding the infernal Goliath on the first throw, we will overcome in the name of the Lord of Hosts and submit the Philistines, which means, sinners, for the service of God.*¹⁹ The following of Christ does not end here, since the Congregation of the Mission proposes *to imitate Jesus Christ in everything he did and taught.*²⁰ That is why in every one of the dispositions which are given to the missionaries, Jesus Christ appears as the final example of what the missionary is trying to achieve. Since Jesus did such and such a thing, the missionary will also do it. And he will try to do it as Jesus did it, because the Congregation also proposes *to imitate everything he did so well*²¹ Just a quick reading of the short text of the Common rules is enough to arrive at the conclusion that St. Vincent wanted that each of the missionaries commit himself to being a prolongation of Christ himself, in his mission, in his relation to God and in his dealings with others. That is why he highlights as the first end of the congregation *to dedicate oneself to personal perfection, trying to practice to the best of his abilities, the virtues which this Divine Master wanted to teach us by word and example.*²²

¹⁵ Lc 4:18.

¹⁶ Mt 9:35.

¹⁷ Cf. R.C. I, 2.

¹⁸ Cf. Cons. C.M., n. 7.

¹⁹ R.C. X, 12.

²⁰ R.C. I, 1.

²¹ R.C. XII, 1.

²² R.C. I, 1.

To Achieve the Personal Perfection of a Missionary

For St. Vincent personal perfection cannot be conceived of on the margin of, or even less as against, our vocation. Remembering the doctrine of St. Francis de Sales, he repeats several times that the bishop cannot neglect his pastoral responsibilities to dedicate himself to contemplation like a Carthusian, nor the Carthusian abandon his solitude for wandering the roads preaching the Gospel.²³ The missionary will achieve perfection fulfilling the duties of his vocation following Jesus Christ as the different chapters of the Common Rules indicate. This is following Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor, reproducing his attitudes and actions towards God and in the service of humanity, in reverential love of the Father, compassionate charity towards the poor and confidence in divine providence. And this conviction is so strong that he will cite for the Daughters of Charity the authority of Pope Clement VIII who proposes fidelity to the rule as sufficient for canonization without requiring another miracle.²⁴

2. Called Together for the Mission of the Community

Looking back over the beginnings of the Congregation of the Mission, from the foundational experience which St. Vincent places at his stay in Gannes-Folleville, passing through the contract of association of the first missionaries or the bull *Salvatoris Nostri* which approved the Congregation, one is convinced that St. Vincent always thought about a community for mission.

The Common Rules point out as the second and third end of the Congregation evangelizing the poor, especially those of the country, and helping clerics acquire the knowledge and virtue necessary for their state in life.²⁵ St. Vincent conceived of the mission like this, following Jesus Christ, responding to the needs which his experience had led him to discover in the people and the Church. In reality this meant continuing, in the concrete circumstances of time and place, the following of Christ, sent by the Father to save the human race. In the same direction of openness to the salvific will of God and concrete reality, the Congregation could reformulate its end in the new Constitutions, *attentive to the will of God which is manifested in*

²³ Cf. SVP.ES IX, 527.934-935; SV X, 356-357.585; SVP. IX, 446.

²⁴ Cf. SVP.ES IX, 932.987.1123; SV X, 353.365.409; SVP. X, 285.249.329.

²⁵ Cf. R.C. I, 1.

*a special way in the needs of the poor of present day society as it was manifested in the past to St. Vincent.*²⁶

The reformulation of the end in the Constitutions and Statutes in the time after the Council is not the goal of this study, but rather to concentrate on some community elements which are taken from the present Constitutions and in a special way are already pointed out in the Common Rules with their strengths and weaknesses.

Submission to the Superior

One of the important chapters in a community for mission has to be the activities and ministries which the community has undertaken. Chapter XI of the Common Rules discusses the missions and the other ministries of the Congregation on behalf of the neighbor. And, perhaps here more than in any other place, is the disjunction between the text and present thinking about relations among the members of the community. It turns out that in a community for mission the activity is centered in the superior or in authority in general, which seems to indicate that the individual can do nothing for himself. It seems that neither his opinion, his initiative, his concerns and questions, or his personal values are taken into account. Many things have to be done, some very important, but it seems that one can do nothing if the superior has not thought about it, or not thought it right or prefers something else. For the individual nothing remains other than the disposition of a tool in the hands of the craftsman,²⁷ an instrument which can rust in the craftsman's toolbox for lack of use.

If we pass from this to the description of the relationships of obedience expounded in Chapter V of the Common Rules things get worse. The superior appears to be the Lord and Ruler of all things and, we might say, all persons. It is necessary to give him a submission of judgment and will with a type of blind obedience. He always orders for the best and it is necessary to attend not only to his expressed will, but also his intention.²⁸

We cannot expect to find expounded the principles of responsibility, participation or subsidiarity which only found adequate formulation in the theology of religious life after the Council and which frequently in practice still seem more like ideals

²⁶ Const. C.M., *Introduction*.

²⁷ Cf. R.C. V, 2.

²⁸ Cf. R.C. V, 2.

yet to be achieved than already fulfilled. There is not even mentioned St. Vincent's way of working which was so frequent we might say it was his usual way of acting.

St. Vincent's Practice

The elaboration of the text of the Common Rules, as Fr Koch maintains,²⁹ was a long task, open to a wide consultation which took into account personal corrections by some confreres, passing to modifications by groups and finally to the General Assembly. Taking into account that we only have preserved about a third of the letters which it has been calculated that St. Vincent wrote, we can suppose that the consultation on this matter was even wider.

In his advice to the young missionary, Fr. A. Durand, named superior of the seminary at Agde at age 27, there is outlined a way of exercising this office which is far from the one that appears in the Common Rules. The superior has to be united to God because *it is necessary that Jesus Christ work in us or we in him; that he labor in us or we in him; that we speak like him and with his spirit*, and because *there is the storeroom from which you can withdraw the instructions that are needed to fulfill worthily the obligations which you will have*; praying to God for the needs of the others, *confident that you will obtain more fruit from this means than from any other; without the passionate feeling of being superior or of being the master, but rather by behaving towards them as one of the others; disposed to referring to God all of the good which may be done by us; on the contrary, to attribute to ourselves all of the evil which might occur in the community; remembering that all of the disorders come principally from the superior who, by negligence or his bad example, introduces the disorder, just as all the parts of the body get sick when the head is not well.*³⁰

When Fr. E. Blatiron, superior in Genoa, complained that it appeared that his missionaries were less submissive than people outside the community, St. Vincent excused them by reminding him that novelty is always attractive and that once in a while they have to put up with this; and he makes this wise and understanding recommendation: *If your men grow weary of the work or balk at obedience, you must bear with them. Get what you can gently from*

²⁹ BERNARD JEAN KOCH, *Drawing Up the Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission*, VINCENTIANA, Year 52, n. 5, September-October 2008, pp. 413-428.

³⁰ SVP.ES XI, 235-242; SV XI, 342-351.

*them. True, it is good to be firm in attaining your goal, but use appropriate, attractive and agreeable means.*³¹ The missionary, even in the office of superior, or perhaps even more in that role, *has to be a man full of mercy.*³²

If this is the difference between the practice of St. Vincent and the text, what endures today from the Common Rules on the community? Here is where we need to inject the light of present reflection by the Church and the Congregation. The Mission and each one of the activities which are undertaken is the Mission of the Congregation which participates in the Mission of the Church. No individual can set up the mission on his own or try to impose his own vision of things or his own way or doing things or his own initiatives. The superior is the tie that binds together different opinions and initiatives, which are sometimes in opposition. The relationship with him can be seen as an exercise of discernment so that each one can submit to the lordship of the one Jesus Christ in whose name the community has come together. If it is true that all of the members of the community have to participate in the discernment, many times the only practical way of advancing to decisions is to restrict them to smaller groups or even to the authority of the superior.

All of these ideas are not expressed in the Common Rules. From them, however, the text of the Common Rules acquires a new value beyond the letters on the page.

3. Participating in the Mission of the Church

We cannot expect from the text of the Common Rules an exposition of the theology of the local Church as an event and fulfillment of the universal Church, nor of the community as the living cell of the Church which participates in its life and work. This appears, more or less fortunately, in the text of the present Constitutions. Our particular participation in its life and mission appears in the Constitutions approved by the Church. The individual inserts himself in the church in and through his insertion in the community and he does it by fidelity to his charism. Our insertion in the life of the Church is neither more intense nor more clear from a weakened common denominator which makes us equal, in works and obligations, to all of the faithful. The Church approves for us a life and a mission as an expression of its own life and mission. Being

³¹ SVP.ES IV, 75; SV IV, 74-75; SVP. IV, 79-80.

³² SVP.ES XI, 234; SV XI, 341.

faithful to the Church is being faithful to this way of life and this mission which has been confided to us.

None of this appears in the Common Rules either. But in them are sufficiently accentuated our belonging to the Church and our submission to its authority. We owe obedience to the pope and to the bishops in whose dioceses the Congregation is established, even though in this case is added *according to our institute*,³³ because it does not fall under the bishop's competence to change what has been approved in our Constitutions. Moreover we do not undertake anything in the parishes without the consent of the pastors.³⁴ Those who go on missions will bring with them a certification from the bishop and will also let him know what has been done.³⁵

This is the way the Common Rules describe our insertion in the Church. It might not be theologically profound, but it is sufficient for our connection with the hierarchical activity of the Church

4. In Fraternal Relations with the Members

Another chapter in which, in some way, the community elements are pointed out is chapter VIII, titled: On the Mutual Relationships Among Us. Although there abound in it norms for the way and times to speak, it includes many more things by which the Latin term, *conversatio*, is expanded to mean any dealings between us.

The first thing that stands out in this chapter is the figure of Jesus Christ who brings together the disciples and gives them norms for the correct community living among them. By way of example it cites: they will love each other mutually; they will wash each other's feet; when they have some disagreement, they will seek reconciliation; they will go out two by two; and, finally, the one who wishes to be the greatest among them will make himself the least of all; and other similar things.³⁶

This figure of Jesus with the apostles has a particular relevance today. We had to wait for the renewal of the Code of Canon Law in 1983 for our style of life to be satisfactorily designated in the legislation of the Church. From a Congregation without Vows (without religious vows), which was the title which corresponded to us in the code of 1917, we passed to being a Community of Apostolic Life. The term, Apostolic Life, refers directly to this way of living by

³³ R.C. V, 1.

³⁴ Cf. R.C. V, 1.

³⁵ Cf. R.C. XI, 5.

³⁶ R.C. VIII, 1.

Jesus and the apostles and disciples from whom he chose the twelve who were with him and whom he sent to preach.³⁷

The norms of Jesus, which St. Vincent cites for this first Community of Apostolic Life, includes norms for the twelve and common norms for all Christians, which when applied to our community form the beautiful manual of community living. They are norms of mutual love, of service, of forgiveness and reconciliation, of collaboration, of humility without which a Christian community cannot exist.

Fraternal Love

Fraternal love is the foundation of every Christian community. *The love of God which has been poured out in our hearts by the Spirit which has been given to us*³⁸ and which allows us to love Jesus. *The as I have loved you*³⁹ said right at the end of Jesus' human life, permits us to understand all that he did for us and which we have to do for our brothers. The washing of the feet, when rightly understood, is nothing more than a gesture which captures a constant attitude of service for which one is disposed to give oneself, to give up one's life, to die for one's brother.

St. Vincent had already mentioned in chapter II of the Common Rules the acts of love which always have to be present in the community. This is a list taken from St. Paul which St. Vincent borrowed saying: *All of this should always be undertaken unless there is something against God's commandments, the teachings of the Church or the Constitutions of our Congregation.*⁴⁰ In the Last Supper, it is not necessary to point out, the master's example stands out: *Do you understand what I have done? Then go and do likewise.*⁴¹

In the Manner of Good Friends

Community living among the confreres as proposed by St. Vincent comes with a fortunate phrase: in the manner of good friends. Nevertheless, the phrase needs a few annotations. The goal which St. Vincent proposes for the community is not friendship, but rather the great respect with which we have to treat each other so *that*

³⁷ Cf. Mc 3:13-14.

³⁸ Rom 5:5.

³⁹ Jn 13:14.

⁴⁰ R.C. II, 12.

⁴¹ Jn 13:12.27.

*fraternal charity and a holy union will remain alive among us.*⁴² The friends to whom St. Vincent refers love each other and live together. The reason for this friendship is the shared life to which the conviction of one call to share the same mission has brought us. Therefore friendship in the community has to be open, extended to all who share this life and respond to the same call, without excluding anyone. Love, the motor which has started the response to the call, acquires then in fraternal relationships the colorful warmth of friendship. The one, same response to the God who calls is open to zeal for the mission and friendship among brothers.

The lasting and always growing experience of fraternal charity and holy union which St. Vincent proposes as the foundation of our upright community living demands a great deal of mutual respect. Respect is born from the value we give to each other, not only as a different person but as the presence of the Lord who accompanies us when we gather in his name. As an initial response, respect means overcoming any mere uneducated spontaneity, by which one behaves as he likes, but with attention to the other. Respect includes a positive acceptance of difference which permits us not only to tolerate it because there is no other option, but to accept it as a gift with which God enriches the community. From this positive acceptance of the other as different there follows the need to help the other grow in his own situation for the good of the community, including even a personal sacrifice. Here is the foundation of condescension, not as the tolerance of one who is forced to put up with someone, but as the generosity of communion and the joy in another's growth. Lastly, respect will make one not live the demands of community life as a loss of personal liberty but as a gift of friendship, and even as an act of devotion to the presence of the Lord who is there with those gathered in his name.

5. With Special Attention to the Weak

It is undeniable that the missionary is fulfilled in fidelity to the ideal of the first missionary sent to save the human race. The Vincentian vision is centered on Jesus Christ sent to evangelize the poor. *This is what he did and wishes to continue doing through us.*⁴³ Among the poor, the sick, especially when they were poor, merited Christ's attention. St. Vincent also proposed to the missionaries a special attention to the sick.

⁴² R.C. VIII, 2.

⁴³ SVP.ES XI, 386; SV XII, 79; **SVP XII**.

It does not cease to surprise that in such a small book, dedicated to organizing the life of the Congregation, a whole chapter is dedicated to the sick. Fr. Vicente de Dios commented on this theme recently in **Vincentiana**.⁴⁴

In this chapter VI of the Common Rules four points with a reference to the community need to be highlighted. 1) We should be solicitous in visiting the sick and helping them because it is one of the *things Christ did and recommended frequently*⁴⁵ and we want to do what he did.⁴⁶ 2) They *represent for us Jesus Christ*⁴⁷ and the encounter with them becomes an encounter with Him who holds this as being done to him. 3) Commitment to the mission has to fill our lives completely, even in moments of weakness and sickness, which place us in a *new pulpit to preach Christian virtues, above all patience and conformity to God's will*.⁴⁸ 4) This special participation in the mission, which is sickness, has to be undertaken from belonging to the community and has to be submitted to obedience, not only to health practices, but also to the superior of the house.⁴⁹ From the relationship of obedience, we convert our sickness into an act of service for the good of the community.

Translation: JOHN PATRICK PRAGER, C.M.

⁴⁴ VICENTE DE DIOS, *Matters Concerning the Sick*, VINCENTIANA, Year 52, n. 3, May-Jun 2008, pp. 204-212.

⁴⁵ R.C. VI, 1.

⁴⁶ R.C. VI, 1.

⁴⁷ R.C. VI, 2.

⁴⁸ R.C. VI, 3.

⁴⁹ Cf. R.C. VI, 2.4.