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The Congregation of the Mission An Example of a Society of Apostolic Life

BY

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TRANSLATED

BY

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Historical Tendencies to Make all Orders “Religious” and the New Situation*

The present Societies of Apostolic Life (called “Societies of Men and Women Living in Common without Vows” in the 1917 Code of Canon Law) have been carving out a niche in the code and have finally achieved acceptable canonical status. As we shall see later on, this does not mean that all problems have been completely solved.

Ever since the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) which forbade the founding of new religious orders and the formulation of new rules, canonical legislation has slanted everything toward the religious state. Even the decrees of Saint Pius V (1566 and 1568), which did permit the founding of religious orders and secular societies, were a roadblock for potential founders who desired neither of these two options. They did not want to found a religious order because they wanted their members to be free to work in the apostolate. They did not want to establish a secular society because they wanted their foundations to be communities of men or women committed to the demands of personal holiness and of the apostolate.

Let us look at Vincent. He did not want to found a religious order because he felt that the canonical norms for religious would hinder the missionary’s mobility and flexibility, which he felt were necessary for the apostolate of evangelizing the rural poor. He wanted to found a

*Translator’s note: This is a substantial rather than a critical translation of an article in Spanish which appeared in *Vincentiana*, 4-5 (1994): 234-45. Numbers have been added to the paragraphs for ease in referencing. Because three canonical titles appear so often in the text, I have resorted to the following acronyms: Communities of Common Life Without Vows, CCLWV; Societies of Apostolic Life, Societies of Apostolic Life; and Institutes of Consecrated Life, Institutes of Common Life.

missionary community which, following Jesus's example, went from town to town and from village to village preaching the gospel, or as he said, "distributing the bread of the divine word to the humble." On the other hand, he wanted the members of the Congregation to practice certain virtues characteristic of a missionary and to live in accordance with the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, and obedience, following in the footsteps of our Lord, the evangelizer of the poor. He earnestly looked for the "blessed invention" which, as he explained to Monsieur Portail, consists in enjoying all that is good about religious life without being religious in the canonical sense.

All the changes made by the Roman Curia with respect to "secular communities" have been aimed at making them religious in a canonical sense. This is true of the Constitution *Conditae a Christo* of Leo XIII (1900). Most of the secular congregations of that time became religious orders in a canonical sense. As Cardinal Larraona pointed out, the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity were exempted because they wanted, at all cost, to be faithful to their founder, Saint Vincent.¹

This new tendency of "classifying all as religious" emerged in the provisionally approved Code of Canon Law of 1917. This code dedicated title 17 of book 1, part 2 to Societies of Common Life Without Vows. Some communities, like the Vincentians, had to go through mental gymnastics to make sense out of this title. It was obvious that Vincentian communities were taking vows. The gymnastics consisted in making a distinction between public vows, which were recognized and accepted by the Church, and private vows, which were not. But even this distinction did not produce clarity because the canonical rules for private vows could not be applied to Vincentian vows. Our vows have many aspects (who can take vows, for what period of time, content, dispensation, etc.) which are regulated by our own particular law and not by canon law.

Conflicts often arose when the canons of the 1917 Code were applied to Communities of Common Life without Vows. Such communities usually applied criteria derived from its own tradition, while the Roman experts tended to apply criteria meant for religious orders.

¹This Cardinal, a specialist in the comparative law of religious, Secretary of the Congregation for Religious (1952), later Prefect of this Congregation, pointed out that the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity by rights should have become institutes of religious. Faithfulness to the mind of the Founder prevented them from being classified as religious orders.

On several occasions, Father François Verdier, superior general of the Congregation of the Mission (1919-1926), complained about the Roman Congregation's proclivity to act in this manner. I will give an example of how conflicts could arise. Bishops were not at all happy with the fact that rectors of seminaries were frequently changed because they were also superiors of the local community with a limited term of office.

Quite naturally, canonists favored sweeping interpretations and consequently tended to classify all communities as religious. While they may have been well versed in common law, they knew little about the particular laws and traditions of communities. The application of the norms of Canon Law to Communities of Common Life Without Vows was not always well thought out. The canonists allowed themselves to be guided more by external appearances than by the theology and laws proper to these communities. It was easier for them to apply what was common than to respect what was specific to each community. The assertion that these communities resembled religious orders served as a criterion for interpretation and application rather than as a simple statement of fact that such similarities seemed to exist.

The Communities of Common Life Without Vows, little aware of their own identity, adopted lifestyles and apostolates which clouded over a vision of their own specific identities. In our Congregation, for example, we have had two trends. One might be called "conventual," that is, the tendency to shape our lifestyle to be like that of a monastery. Perhaps the basis for this tendency lies in the Common Rules which contain elements derived from conventual communities: the chapter of faults, the rule of silence, etc. The other tendency might be called "secular," that is, one which looks rather to the apostolate, a greater insertion in the world, and an adaptation of lifestyle to the needs of the apostolate. If we read the circulars of the superiors general issued before the Second Vatican Council, we get the impression that they favored the conventual lifestyle. There are few circulars which encourage confreres to get out of the house and give themselves wholeheartedly to the apostolate. Possibly these were not needed, or perhaps there existed the danger of excessive secularization or "worldliness."

What does the Second Vatican Council say about Communities of Common Life Without Vows? "Lumen Gentium," Chapter 3, under the title "Religious," mentions that there are institutes which have

vows and others which have bonds similar to vows.² The decree "Perfectae Charitatis" asserts that the principles which apply to the renewal of religious orders can also be extended to societies of common life without vows and to secular institutes, provided their specific character is preserved.³

In addition to these cursory allusions, the Second Vatican Council issued a strong call to return to the sources, to the vision, purpose and spirit of the founder and to the traditions of the particular institute. The present Code of Canon Law insists on the same thing.⁴ This call awakened a desire among a small group of superiors general of communities of common life without vows, with headquarters in Rome, to do whatever possible to ensure that they had their proper place in the revised Code of Canon Law, with a clear and apt description of their identity.

The first schema (1977) dealing with institutes of consecrated life and similar organizations was totally rejected. In this draft, the communities of common life without vows were retitled Societies of Associates. Nobody liked this title, and it was changed to Societies of Apostolic Life. The group of superiors general of the newly-coined societies of apostolic life met in Rome to draw up for the redaction commission of the new code those elements proper to the identity of their communities. This group was created in 1970. Father James Richardson, superior general of the Congregation of the Mission (1968-1980) became its president in February 1978. Later on a subcommittee of experts was formed to help those revising this section of the code. Father Cecil Parres, C.M. was appointed to be a permanent member of this subcommittee. The subcommittee did good work and delivered to the redaction commission of the new code the opinions of the Societies of Apostolic Life. Due to these efforts, the present canon 731 pulls together the substance of what these societies wanted in the code. In effect, the group of superiors general of the societies educated the canonists revising the Code about their identity.⁵

²"Lumen Gentium," 44.

³"Perfectae Charitatis," 1.

⁴Canon 578.

⁵Bishop Lara-Castillo, then secretary of the Commission for the Revision of the Code and today cardinal and president of the Pontifical Council for the Interpretation of the Code, showed a good grasp of the fact that Societies of Apostolic Life are not religious orders.

Theological Foundations of the Societies of Apostolic Life

Having finished the historical background, I feel it is important to explain, at least in general terms, some theological principles necessary for a clearer understanding of how the code packages the Societies of Apostolic Life. The canons of the code must be bearers of theological truth. Otherwise they serve no purpose: they do not speak the truth, they are an unconvincing pile of regulations, and, what is worse, they become a barrier to living out one's charism.

In my opinion the Societies of Apostolic Life are based on a theology of the mission rather than on a theology of the consecrated life, which is centered on the practice of the evangelical counsels. It is evident that these theologies are not mutually exclusive, but each enjoys priority in its own field. The theology of the consecrated life enjoys priority in the Institutes of Consecrated Life, while the theology of the mission should be the basis for legislation in the Societies of Apostolic Life. Canon 573 describes Institutes of Consecrated Life on the basis of the profession of the evangelical counsels. Through the living out of these counsels, the members follow Christ more closely and "are totally dedicated to God who is loved most of all, so that, having dedicated themselves to his honor, the upbuilding of the Church, and the salvation of the world by a new and special title, they strive for the perfection of charity in service to the kingdom of God and, having become an outstanding sign in the Church, they may foretell the heavenly glory." The thrust of the theological elements is very clear. The scene changes when we switch to the Societies of Apostolic Life in canon 731. In this canon emphasis is placed on the apostolic goal proper to the society; its members lead lives as brothers or sisters in common suitable for that group, and they aspire to the perfection of charity through the observance of the constitutions.

Canon 673 describes more concretely the apostolate of religious. "The apostolate of all religious consists first in their witness of a consecrated life which they are bound to foster by prayer and penance." This does not mean that institutes of Consecrated Life do not devote themselves to an apostolate. The questions are: what kind of apostolate do they carry out and on what theology is this based? Canon 675, referring to those Institutes of Consecrated Life which dedicate themselves to the apostolate states that "apostolic action pertains to their very nature. Hence, the whole life of members is to be imbued with an apostolic spirit, indeed the whole apostolic action is to be informed by

a religious spirit. Apostolic action is always to proceed from an intimate union with God, and it is to confirm and foster that union." Nothing like this is said about Societies of Apostolic Life. The discussion of Societies of Apostolic Life is given over to elements common to every apostolate, to elements which offer the theology of the mission, and to elements of a specific spirituality.

If we focus our attention on the names of those societies (twenty-seven male and nine female) which currently make up the Societies of Apostolic Life of pontifical law, we get an idea of the distinctive character whether it be apostolic, missionary, or sacerdotal, or a combination of these: the Congregation of the Mission, Sulpicians, Eudists, and the Foreign Missions of Paris, the White Fathers or the Missionaries of Africa, the African Missions of Lyons, almost all the missionary institutes ad gentes (about seventeen of them), Society of the Catholic Apostolate or the Pallottines, Society of Priests of Cottolengo, etc. it is evident that the nature of their apostolates is distinct from the apostolates of those great historical Institutes of Consecrated Life: Benedictines, Franciscans, Capuchins, Jesuits.

I must confess that it is not always easy to fix boundaries between the apostolates of the Institutes of Consecrated Life and those of the Societies of Apostolic Life. Today a number of the former, which became religious orders because of the constitution *Conditae a Christo* of Leo XIII and because of the Code of Canon Law of 1917, feel a little uncomfortable within the present code and say they would feel more comfortable in section 2, book 2, part 3, which talks about the Societies of Apostolic Life. These difficulties also arise when we wish to define the christology and the spirituality of the founders.

Essential Elements of the Societies of Apostolic Life

The positive and essential elements of the Societies of Apostolic Life are the following:

(1) The achievement of the "apostolic goal" by the members of the society. The reason why these societies were founded and approved by the Church is their own apostolic goal. It need not be exclusive, but it must be proper to the society. It is not difficult to define the particular apostolic goal, which is frequently the reason for a particular vow and certainly the axis on which turn the other aspects of life in the society. Let us look at the Congregation of the Mission. The apostolic goal is clear in the Common Rules and in the first article of the

Constitutions. Another question is whether or not the Congregation of the Mission in its history has been faithful to this goal. A question which is asked today with a certain amount of urgency has to do with faithfulness to the apostolic goal of the Congregation either through traditional ministries or through those which should be initiated, given the circumstances of time and place, as indicated in articles 2 and 13 of the Constitutions and in Statute 1.

(2) "Fraternal Life in Common," according to the institute's particular lifestyle. While the fraternal life in common is essential for Societies of Apostolic Life, it is not so for Institutes of Consecrated Life, for example, the secular institutes. It is more important for conventual religious and considerably less important for regular clerics like the Jesuits. For the Congregation of the Mission, fraternal life in common has been an important key point since its founding. I would dare to say that the foundational contract of the Congregation is a community plan for the apostolate. I believe that the Congregation has never in its history had, as it does now, a chapter in the Constitutions concerning fraternal life in common. If we were nitpicking, we might say that this chapter is a bit utopian.

(3) Another essential element is to "strive for the perfection of charity through the observance of the constitutions." Therefore in Societies of Apostolic Life the constitutions take on a special importance, as the means to achieve the perfection of charity. On the other hand, according to canon 573:3, the members of Institutes of Consecrated Life must strive for the perfection of charity through the observance of the evangelical counsels rather than through the observance of their constitutions. The observance of the constitutions of the Institutes of Consecrated Life is considered to be just one means among others. It is also interesting to note how the obligation to strive for perfection with hard work and zeal in the Congregation of the Mission, has adopted the Pauline expression of putting on the spirit of Christ.⁶

Someone could accuse me of elaborating on topics and making distinctions which only canonists understand and say that at the moment of truth, it is all the same thing. Certainly, at the moment of truth everything is the same, that is, as we approach the light of Christ, the differences disappear. The closer we approach the light which is

⁶*Constitutions and Statutes of the Congregation of the Mission* (Rome, 1984; English translation Philadelphia: 1989), part 1.

Christ, the more the light of Christ makes us equal. In this case, our attempt is to point out those details which can shape a particular lifestyle within the common life. I believe that we have to avoid the mistake of striving to blot out every distinction and end up with only the basic demands made on every Christian. It is necessary to prudently maintain the distinctions so that being a Christian shines forth with all its richness. Number 46 of *Lumen Gentium* advises "religious" that "they should carefully consider that through them, to believers and non-believers alike, the Church truly wishes to give an increasingly clearer revelation of Christ. Through them Christ should be shown contemplating on the mountain, announcing God's kingdom to the multitude, healing the sick and the maimed, turning sinners into wholesome fruit, blessing children, doing good to all, and always obeying the will of the Father who sent him," and he was the only Christ and Lord, son of God and son of Mary.

Canon 731 explicitly mentions a negative element: members of apostolic societies do *not take religious vows*. This is negative in wording but positive in content. The Congregation takes vows by means of which the obligation to live in the Congregation, in conformity with the chaste, poor, and obedient Christ, is confirmed and ratified. This commitment must have already been made when the missionary entered the Congregation. Through the vows, the missionary confirms and ratifies that commitment. The Church, however, does not canonically recognize such vows by common law. It does recognize religious vows, which are called public vows because they are recognized and accepted by the Church.⁷

Nor can we say that vows which are not received nor accepted by the Church canonically are private vows. As I have said before, the concept of the private vow, explained in canon 1192: 1, cannot be applied to the vows of the Congregation.

The second paragraph of canon 731 opens the door for some communities to adopt the evangelical counsels without the danger that they be considered Institutes of Consecrated Life. The evangelical counsels can be adopted or not. If they are adopted, they can be supported by a bond, which might be a vow or something similar. This paragraph appears to be nothing more than a statement of fact. *De facto*, "there are societies in which the members embrace the evangelical counsels by some bond defined in the constitutions."

⁷Canon 1192: 1.

In the case of the Congregation of the Mission, we know that the missionaries take vows of chastity, poverty, obedience, and stability. Our vows have nothing to do with canonical legislation. Canon Law ignores them. The constitutions and traditions are the only sources which give us a clue about their nature, content, and other conditions which might affect, for example, the dispensation which only the Roman Pontiff and the superior general of the Congregation can grant.

Societies of Apostolic Life and Their Resemblance to Institutes of Consecrated Life

What can we say about the assertion that Societies of Apostolic Life are like the Institutes of Consecrated Life? I feel that the Latin word *accedunt* must be correctly translated. The translations of this word into other languages differ quite a bit from each other. One can translate *accedunt* as "to stand side by side" or "look like" or "are similar," none of which mean exactly the same thing. It is not necessary to exaggerate how far apart these translations are nor should one try to pull them so close together that they all mean exactly the same thing. Here is an example. Among the Institutes of Consecrated Life, some religious, especially those historically referred to as conventual, consider fraternal life in common to be an essential element of their institute. In a comparative sense, Vincentian missionaries also consider fraternal life in common to be an essential element of their Congregation. Nevertheless, the two fraternal lives in common are very distinct. One is the center on which everything else hinges; the other (that of the Congregation of the Mission) is totally dependent on the mission.⁸ Broad terms do not say much; only what is specific has something to say. For that reason, when the canons mention fraternal life in common, they generally nuance it by referring to the specific style, spirit, traditions, etc. of the society.

A reading of the canons treating Societies of Apostolic Life allows us to note how many times the code refers us to canons that have been established for Institutes of Consecrated Life, but this is not always the case. The code also refers us in some cases to those canons which legislate for the secular clergy; for example, in regard to a curriculum

⁸*Constitutions and Statutes*, 19.

of studies and ordinations. But even in these cases the code gives priority to what the constitutions dictate. But when the code refers us to laws in that section of the code reserved for Institutes of Consecrated Life, we might ask the question: If these laws are essential for religious, can the laws in themselves be applied to groups similar to religious? The important thing is to examine their content and the code's motive for referring us to these laws. An example might clarify this a bit. In treating the case of the expulsion of members of Societies of Apostolic Life, the code refers us to what is said in the canons regarding members of Institutes of Common Life. Why? I feel that the motivation lies in the fact that the process there outlined gives good protection to the rights of members of any ecclesial community and, at the same time, to the rights of the community itself. It is a process whose past successes have confirmed its value for any ecclesial community. The process happens to be found with the body of legislation concerning Institutes of Consecrated Life because of its history and the way the code is put together.

The Secular Nature of the Congregation of the Mission

The fear that the Congregation of the Mission might be canonically converted into a religious order has created an unwarranted oversensitivity in many confreres. On the one hand, we have canon law which offers to Societies of Apostolic Life an adequate framework and, on the other hand, we have the Constitutions which fit perfectly within that framework. And so the question of our secular nature ought to be treated from the viewpoint of how to be present in the world and in the Church and not from the viewpoint of whether we are religious or secular. The provisional constitutions of 1968 explained this: "The Congregation of the Mission, rooted in human reality, due to its secular character, actively participates in the fate and changes of the world." When the Holy See examined the text of the constitutions approved by the general assembly of 1980, it was surprised to read that being "secular" is one of the characteristics of the company. It is curious that while the Congregation of the Mission has always emphasized its secularity, the Roman Curia, with the exception of Alexander VII (1655), has never accepted it: not Urban VIII in the Bull *Salvatoris Nostri* (1632) nor Pius XII in the apostolic letter *Evangelium ad Pauperes* (1953), nor the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes in 1982.

The last named Congregation told the superior general, Father Richard McCullen, "Either explain what you mean by secular or eliminate the term." In the present code the term "secular" has a number of precise meanings, none of which apply to the Congregation of the Mission. The general council chose to explain the term rather than eliminate it. The explanation is found in article 3, paragraph 2 of the Constitutions: "The Congregation of the Mission, according to the tradition set forth by Saint Vincent, carries on its own apostolate in close cooperation with the bishops and diocesan clergy. For this reason, Saint Vincent often said that the Congregation of the Mission is secular." Why did the council choose to reply in this fashion? Because Vincent always said that the missionaries were of the secular clergy, very close to them, but without being exactly like them, because the dependency of the Congregation of the Mission on bishops applied only to certain aspects of the missions. *De facto*, the Roman Curia accepted the explanation of the general council. The Roman Curia favored the collaboration of all communities with the bishops and secular clergy in all aspects of apostolic activity, and this may have been a factor in the approval.

Consecration and Societies of Apostolic Life

Canonists argue about the existence of two classes of Societies of Apostolic Life: those who include the elements of consecration because they adopt the evangelical counsels, and those who do not adopt the counsels. At first glance, it might appear that the Congregation of the Mission should be among the consecrated Societies of Apostolic Life. The explanations of this question are varied because the term consecration can be understood from distinct points of view.

Limiting myself to the Congregation of the Mission, I feel this way:

(1) The Congregation of the Mission belongs canonically to Societies of Apostolic Life and not to Institutes of Consecrated Life. It is governed by the canons of section 2, book 2, part 3 of the Code of Canon Law.

(2) The members of the Congregation are not considered to be canonically consecrated because they belong to Societies of Apostolic Life and not to Institutes of Consecrated Life, and because they adopt the evangelical counsels not as the principal element of their lives but as spiritual dynamics to reinforce their commitment to the mission.

(3) The members of the Congregation of the Mission truly consecrate themselves to the mission and on behalf of the mission they adopt, not “profess,” the evangelical counsels by means of vows proper to the Congregation, not by vows recognized by canon law.

Although theologically there are distinct kinds of consecration, the present Code of Canon Law, for various reasons, recognizes only one consecration: the profession of the evangelical counsels by means of a bond recognized canonically by the Church and professed in an Institutes of Consecrated Life also recognized by the Church. We should not forget that the lawgiver is free to fix certain canonical limits which need not coincide with all the theological possibilities.

I have no doubt that a Vincentian missionary is a person consecrated for the mission and that this consecration is recognized by the Church, but only through the approval of a particular law, namely, the Constitutions of the Congregation.

The axis on which the consecration of the Vincentian missionary revolves is *following Christ evangelizing the poor*, the commitment to dedicate one’s whole life to the task of putting on the spirit of Christ to achieve the perfection which this particular vocation demands: the commitment to evangelize the poor and to help the clergy and laity in their formation. This is the evangelical center of the consecration of the Vincentian missionary. The Vincentian missionary, then, adopts the following spiritual dynamics and virtues: he lives gospel values; he imitates Christ who is simple, humble, mortified, meek, and full of zeal for the glory of God and of people; he imitates and follows Christ who is chaste, poor, and obedient, a Christ who prays.

In order to understand the meaning of the evangelical counsels which are vowed in the Congregation, one need only read article 28 of the Constitutions: “Wishing to follow the mission of Christ, we commit ourselves as members of the Congregation to evangelize the poor for the whole of our lives. To fulfill this vocation we embrace chastity, poverty, and obedience according to the Constitutions and Statutes.” This is in complete agreement with the Vincentian thought expressed in the Common Rules: “In effect, the little Congregation of the Mission . . . to work for the salvation of people, especially the rural poor . . . has judged that no weapons would be more powerful or more suitable than those which eternal Wisdom so tellingly and effectively used.”

We could bring up many more topics, more or less important, such as incorporation in the Congregation, absences from the house or from the Congregation, dealings with bishops, etc. We will leave them

for another time. Allow me to end this study with some conclusions.

(1) I believe that the Societies of Apostolic Life, and therefore the Congregation of the Mission, now enjoy an adequate canonical framework. Perhaps in section 2 of book 2, after part 3, there could be a part 4 to clarify distinctions between Societies of Apostolic Life and Institutes of Consecrated Life.

(2) The Constitutions fit within the canonical framework and no significant difficulties have been encountered in their adaptation.

(3) From the canonical and constitutional point of view, we understand the framework which contains and supports our identity as the Congregation of the Mission. The principal issues now are: how to preserve it, how to know it better, how to promote it, and how to harmonize it with the Body of Christ, the Church, which is always growing.

I frequently wonder if the members of the Congregation of the Mission are aware of the changes made in our Constitutions with regard to spirituality, apostolate, community, and governance. Institutions that have been around for a long time run the risk of gradually dying because members may not be in tune with what is happening within their own institution. This lack of sensitivity causes them to lose sight of their charism, to lose the capacity to accept necessary changes, and, in a phrase, to lose the ability to live out article 2 of our Constitutions.