Chapter III

THE FOUR VINCENTIAN VOWS: YESTERDAY AND TODAY

Those who become detached from the desire for worldly goods, from the longing for pleasure, and from their own will become children of God. They enjoy perfect freedom. For it is only in the love of God that real freedom is found. They are people who are free, who know no law, who fly, who go left and right, who fly still more. No one can hold them back. They are never slaves of the devil nor of their own passions. Oh, how happy is the freedom of the children of God!

SV XII, 301

Since the publication of the previous chapter in an earlier form, many people have encouraged me to attempt something similar in regard to the four Vincentian vows. I am grateful for their stimulating me to engage in the research and reflection whose fruits I offer below. As with all such projects, I have been helped enormously by the research of others, particularly in the first part of the chapter. But I have also attempted to examine the writings of St. Vincent anew.

2. Many have encouraged me by their use of my article on the five virtues in retreats and formation programs and by translating it into various languages. But I am especially grateful to J.-O. Baylach, former editor of Vincentiana, who was the first to suggest the idea of another article focusing on the vows. I hope that what I have written here addresses the topic at least somewhat adequately.
3. I wish to express my gratitude to the committee which prepared the "Program for Vincentian Formation in the Major Seminary of the Congregation of the Mission." We spent many hours together reflecting on the vows. Likewise, I thank the Superior General and the members of the General Council. On numerous occasions we have shared with one another and written our reflections on evangelical poverty as lived in the Congregation. Of course, I am also indebted to many others who have written at length on the vows, many of whom will be cited in the course of this article.
In that sense, for better or for worse, I stand responsible before the reader for the final outcome. Let me say from the start that I recognize the limitations of what I have written, particularly in the third part of the chapter. I invite reactions and criticism. In a climate of dialogue, or what John Courtney Murray liked to call “civilized argument,”1 we will, I would hope, grow in understanding and deepening our commitment to the vowed life.

In this chapter I will not attempt to narrate the interesting history of St. Vincent’s efforts to have the vows of the Congregation approved by the Holy See. Others have treated this topic exhaustively.2 Nor will I be examining, except in passing, the juridical status of our vows, a topic frequently treated elsewhere.3 My objective is to focus on the meaning of the Vincentian vows yesterday and today. In pursuing that end, I will not try to paint a complete picture of the historical backdrop for living the vows in the seventeenth century. This has been done exceedingly well by several others.4 I will, however, make frequent allusion to those historical circumstances. Without such reference, one could not really interpret the concrete meaning of the vows.

To be even more specific, the direct focus of this chapter is on the meaning of the four vows pronounced, in St. Vincent’s time and ours, by priests, deacons, brothers, and seminarians of the Congregation of the Mission. But, beyond this immediate audience, I do hope that many of the thoughts

presented, both theoretical and practical, will also be useful, at least in part, to the Daughters of Charity and to the huge number of lay men and women who look to St. Vincent de Paul for their inspiration.

I have written the text in such a way that it can be read in its entirety without the numerous footnotes. But for those who wish to study the text at greater length (in houses of formation, for example), I have attempted to offer abundant references, some of which may be of considerable interest.

The chapter is divided into three parts: 1) the four vows as described by St. Vincent; 2) horizon-shifts that have taken place between the seventeenth and the twentieth century; 3) the four vows today.

PART I - THE FOUR VOWS AS DESCRIBED BY ST VINCENT

As was the case with the founders of many communities, St. Vincent saw the vows as both an offensive and defensive “weapon”:

Our Lord came into the world to reestablish the reign of his Father in all persons. He won them back from the devil who had led them astray by the cunning deceit of a greedy desire for wealth, honor and pleasure. Our loving Savior thought it right to fight his enemy with the opposite weapons, poverty, chastity and obedience, which he continued to do right up to his death.

In forging his “weapons,” St. Vincent drew on the long historical tradition of the Church, particularly as he found it in the rule written by St. Ignatius for the Society of Jesus. Naturally, he also added his own touches, adjusting his “arms” to the historical circumstances of seventeenth-century France and to the specific type of Congregation he wished to found. Concretely, he knew that the members of his Company would be living in a world where the temptation to riches, or the “easy” clerical life was very real; he himself had experienced, and given into, this temptation at an earlier stage in his life, seeking a comfortable benefice with which to support himself and his family. Likewise, he saw that in seventeenth-century France faithful celibate living would be no small challenge; while there were some striking role-models among the reforming bishops and clergy of the day, witness to celibacy on

1. Common Rules II, 18 (henceforth, CR). It is interesting to note that for historical reasons (particularly his desire to avoid having the members of the Congregation classified as religious) St. Vincent avoids the term vows in the Common Rules, though he gives a rather thorough description of their content. Cf. his statement in SV XII, 367: “No mention is made of these three vows in our rules, because no Company such as ours has ever mentioned them in its Common Rules.”

the part of many others was dismal. Authority too, both local and Roman, was on the defensive. The episcopacy was in urgent need of reform, with some bishops rarely residing in their dioceses. Civil authorities, moreover, often interfered with what local bishops and Rome attempted to do. The general atmosphere in France, particularly during the Jansenist controversy, was filled with rumblings against ultramontane forces. Finally, and perhaps most important, St. Vincent experienced painfully that many who began good works among the poor failed to persevere in them. He felt the gnawing need, to use his analogy, for stable “armed forces.”

It was in this context that on September 22, 1655, after much struggle, St. Vincent received papal approval for the members of his Congregation to pronounce vows of poverty, chastity, obedience, and stability, while still remaining members of the secular clergy, but exempt from the power of the local ordinary, except in matters pertaining to their mission. Only the pope and the Superior General, when dismissing someone from the Congregation, could dispense from these vows. Vincent hoped that, through pronouncing such vows, his missionaries would renew and deepen the gift of themselves to God for the service of the poor and that later, in time of trial, they would be strengthened by recalling that they had committed themselves for life to this service.

In reflecting on the vows, as well as on other matters pertaining to the

2. A couplet published by Racine in 1682 (cf. Deville, Ibid., 16) reads:

   An order came from St. Germain yesterday.
   They're calling for a meeting, a meeting tomorrow.
   Our archbishop and 52 others,
   Successors of the apostles,
   Will attend. But to know what they'll treat
   That's a mystery.
   There's only one thing very clear:
   That we have 52 prelates
   Who don't live in their dioceses. (Trans. mine)
4. While St. Vincent did not want the members of the Congregation to have the kind of vows religious had, he was convinced that, apart from all juridical considerations, the vows pronounced in the Company had the same value as those of religious. Cf. SV XII, 375: “Though we do not make solemn vows, we receive the same or similar graces as those received by professed religious.”
6. Cf. also A. Dodin, “Los votos en la espiritualidad vicenciana,” in Vicente de Paúl, pervivencia de un fundador (Salamanca, 1972) 110-11; Dodin highlights St. Vincent’s use of the phrase “to give oneself to God,” used so often by St. Vincent in the prayers with which he closed his conferences. Cf., e.g., SV IX, 26, 534, 592; X, 513; XII, 323; XII, 354. Cf. also J.-M. Román, Ibid. 341.
7. SV XI, 233.
Congregation, it is important to note that what St. Vincent said and wrote is only a part of what he actually taught. His practice modified his theory. Sometimes, in fact, what he did contrasted markedly with his written and spoken word. I will allude to these differences in the course of this chapter where they are relevant.

Below, I will present what St. Vincent, by his words, writings and actions, taught about the meaning of the vows. I will make no attempt to defend statements or practices which might seem strange to the modern reader, except occasionally to describe the historical context that made the teaching intelligible in its time. Just as any reader must make adjustments in reading Shakespeare, Descartes, Pascal, or Cervantes (all more or less contemporaries of St. Vincent), so must one make the effort to understand Vincent in his own situation and strive to find the real sense in what he taught, rather than dismiss it too quickly as antiquated. The third part of this chapter will attempt to retrieve the meaning of St. Vincent's teaching for today.

Let me also say, as a final preliminary remark (one that will be repeated frequently in examining each vow), that for understanding the Vincentian vows it is imperative to see them as being in the service of the mission. For St. Vincent, the vows are not merely a matter of personal piety. They are "arms" to equip the missionary to serve the poor zealously and perseveringly. Though Vincent did, like Jesus, speak to his followers about the personal merit ("treasure in heaven") that they would gain by living the vowed life, he saw the vows, on a much deeper level, as ways of following Christ more faithfully in the mission his Father had given him to preach good news to the poor.

Keeping these preliminary remarks in mind, we may now formulate in concrete fashion, and then examine, the basic question which the first part of this chapter addresses: having known and heard St. Vincent, just what did the 130 priests, 44 clerics and 52 lay brothers who were members of the Congregation on September 27, 1660, understand as they reflected on the vows of the Company?


2. Recognition of this fact is all the more important since today we have probably only a tenth of the letters that St. Vincent wrote and a very small fraction of the conferences that he gave to the Vincentians, the Daughters of Charity and the Visitation nuns. For a very interesting account of sources available at the time of Abelly, cf. A. Dodin, La légende et l'histoire de Monsieur Depaul et saint Vincent de Paul (Paris: OEIL, 1985) 84-101.

3. SV XII, 366, 372.

1. Poverty

His teaching

St. Vincent sees a life of evangelical poverty as an utter necessity in a Congregation dedicated to the evangelization of the poor. Without it, the Congregation will cease to exist. Poverty is our foundation stone. Using the language of warfare once again, he calls it “an unbreachable rampart” by which the Congregation will be preserved forever. To encourage the confreres to live it, he places before them the example of Jesus, his apostles, and the first Christians, and reminds them that in Matthew’s gospel Jesus makes it the first of the beatitudes and the condition for perfection.

He urges the members to have a deep affective love for poverty and also to put it into effective practice. But there is a delicate balance to be maintained on the practical side. St. Vincent recognizes right from the start that, because of their work in the missions, they will not be able to live a life of strict poverty, like the mendicant orders. Yet still, in that context, the things they necessarily have—like their food, their rooms, their beds—should be similar to those of a poor person. They should be willing to experience at least some of the sting of poverty.

Basically, St. Vincent tells the priests and brothers, the use of all things is to be in common. If they have funds or property, they can retain their ownership even after pronouncing vows. Likewise, they can be the heirs of their parents’ property. If they should leave the Company, this property is theirs. In their wills, they may deed it to anyone they wish. But, while members of the Company, they may not use it or any revenues coming from it without the permission of superiors, and, even then, it should be used in good works.

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1. SV XI, 223.
2. SV XI, 78.
3. CR III, 1; SV XI, 232.
4. CR III, 1,3; Cf. SV XI, 263: “The state of Missionaries is an apostolic state which consists, as did the state of the apostles, in leaving and abandoning all things to follow Jesus Christ, and to become true Christians.” Cf. also SV XI, 224-25; XII, 367-68.
6. CR III, 2.
7. CR III, 7.
8. SV XI, 223: “Although there are some who have possessions, they do not use them as if they were their own, though they retain radical dominion over them.”
9. Cf. SV IV, 11-12, where St. Vincent explains this to Louis Thibault.
10. Alexander VII, Alias nos supplicationibus; cf. SV XIII, 406-409. Cf. also the conference of November 14, 1659 (SV XII, 383), in which St. Vincent outlines for the confreres the
St. Vincent sees clearly that the practice of poverty will liberate the confreres. They will be willing to go anywhere, to do anything, to brave all hardships, if they are attached to nothing. Without this virtue, they will not persevere in the Company. As was the case with Judas, avarice is the root of all evil. But on the deepest level, if they are to be truly free, they must renounce not merely material things, but all other attachments. In fact, they must renounce their very selves. Their renunciation must not be just external; rather, it must come from the heart. True peace of mind will then follow.

St. Vincent is concerned not just about individual poverty, but also about the poverty (and consequent liberty) of the Company. He writes to Jacques Chiroye, superior at Luçon, in 1650: “In the name of God, let us be more concerned about extending the kingdom of Jesus Christ than about our own possessions. If we take care of his affairs, he will take care of ours.”

He was convinced that, like all virtues, poverty could be acquired by repeated acts. In the Common Rules, he lists a number of concrete practices which he judged would keep the spirit of poverty alive in the Company:

- items like food, clothing, books, and furniture will be for common use and superiors will distribute them to each according to need;
- no one will have any possessions without the knowledge of the superior and each shall be willing to give up such possessions at the superior’s command;
- confreres shall not use possessions as if they were their own;
- nor shall they give things away, receive them, lend them out, or take them from one house to another without the permission of the superior;
- they shall not neglect the goods they have or allow them to deteriorate;

meaning of the fundamental statute on poverty.

1. SV XI, 228. Cf. also X, 513.
2. SV XI, 237.
3. SV XI, 242-43.
4. SV XI, 246.
5. SV XII, 381. For St. Vincent, this includes “judgment, will, inclinations, desires and passions.”
6. SV XII, 370: “One of the advantages of this state is the peace of mind we enjoy, having, by our vows, renounced all things.”
7. SV III, 531-32; cf. also VIII, 151-52.
8. SV XI, 247.
9. In this regard, it is also interesting to read the list of faults given by St. Vincent in the conferences of October 16 and 23, 1654; cf. SV XI, 163-64.
10. CR III, 3; SV XI, 246. In the conference of November 21, 1659, St. Vincent comments on the various practices stipulated in the Common Rules; cf. SV XII, 386f.
12. CR III, 5.
- they shall not own superfluous items nor curiosities;¹
- they shall avoid giving the impression of ownership; their rooms should not be locked, nor should they have anything locked with a private key, unless with the expressed permission of the superior.²

Since temptations against poverty can come in spiritual guise, the Rules forbid the confreres to desire benefices or ecclesiastical dignities, both of which could be sources of considerable enrichment.³ If confreres got involved in that, the Congregation, St. Vincent felt, would become quickly destabilized, with members entering and leaving rapidly.

The missionary dimension of the vow of poverty is paramount for Vincent. He was convinced that if we become attached to material possessions, "then we can say goodbye to the works of the Mission, and even to the Mission itself, for it will no longer exist."⁴ Providence is the real guarantee of our future, not material goods.⁵

Practice modifying theory

But, as was often the case with St. Vincent, practice modified theory. He was a man of great common sense and practical wisdom, which he applied to concrete cases that arose.

While he forcefully urged the members of the Company to live a simple life-style, at the same time he wanted superiors to be careful to supply the needs of the confreres. In a delightful letter, he tells Antoine Colée, superior at Toul: "I have heard that your bread was not well made. Please have it done by a baker, if you can find one, for the most important thing is to have good bread. It would also be well to vary the food sometimes ... to relieve the strain on poor nature which tires of seeing the same things all the time."⁶ In advising Antoine Durand, who had just been named superior at Agde, he urges him to be very attentive to temporal affairs, adding: "When the Son of God sent out his apostles, at first he recommended that they not bring any

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¹. CR III, 7.
². CR III, 8. In speaking of the means for practicing poverty, St. Vincent suggests that superiors visit the rooms. With great simplicity, he states in a conference in 1654: "I ask the officers of the house to see to this. Let a beginning be made tomorrow with my room, then Fr. Portail’s, then those of Fr. Almeras ..." Cf. SV XI, 164-65. Cf. also the conference of December 5, 1659 (SV XII, 408-409), where St. Vincent treats the problem of those rummaging around in the rooms of others.
³. CR III, 10. St. Vincent comments on this rule in a conference given on Nov. 28, 1659; cf. SV XII, 399-403.
⁴. SV XI, 79.
⁵. SV VIII, 151; cf. also IX, 56-57.
⁶. Cf. SV I, 387.
money. But later on, as the number of his disciples grew, he decided to have a bursar in the group, who was charged not just with feeding the poor, but also with tending to the needs of his family."

Recognizing that rules and laws are to be applied to the general run of cases, not to every particular one, he was willing to make reasonable exceptions, especially when the end of the law could be preserved. Though in the Rule he forbids accepting benefices, he was on occasion not loath to accept them, as well as other sources of revenue, sometimes even burdensome ones, if it was a question of getting the funds to establish a mission on a firm foundation.2

His concern for the material well-being of the Company was so great that it even moved him to go against the evangelical maxims. "I have great pain, for reasons you can imagine, in going against the advice of Our Lord, who did not want his followers to take legal action" he writes to Monsieur Desbordes, a counsellor in Parliament,3 "and if we have already done it, it is because I could not in conscience give up something so legitimately acquired, community property of which I have charge. . . ."

2. Chastity

His teaching

In seeking to understand what St. Vincent says about chastity, it is important to note the thought patterns of the era in which he lived. The view of human sexuality expressed in the spiritual reading books and theological literature available to St. Vincent in early seventeenth-century France was largely negative4. The arrival of Jansenism, with its moral rigorism and its

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1. SV XI, 350.
4. At the end of his chapters on chastity, Alphonsus Rodriguez, whose famous book, Practice of Perfection and Christian Virtues, was being read at table at St. Lazare on May 17, 1658 (cf. SV XII, 12) tells an anecdote which is illustrative of the attitude of contemporary spiritual writers: "Father Master Avila quotes an instance of a holy hermit to whom God had granted to know the great danger to which he lay exposed in this life; and, considering that, he put over his head a hood of mourning and covered his face in such manner that he could see nothing but the ground he was about to tread upon, and never more would speak to man, and never more took his eyes off the ground, weeping to see himself in such danger as man lives in. And when there came many people to see him in his cell out of curiosity for the great change that had come over him, and asked the reason of this novelty and of the extreme course he had so suddenly taken, he never answered anything else but: 'Let me alone, because I am a man.' Another saint used to say: 'Woe is me, because I am still capable of offending God mortally.' " Cf. authorized American edition, translated by Joseph Rickaby (Chicago:
pessimistic view of human nature, only intensified the situation.1 Though St. Vincent reacted against the Jansenists and became their staunch opponent, particularly after the death of his friend, the Abbé de Saint-Cyran,2 he too breathed the air that they did. Much of what he says to the missionaries about chastity has a negative tone, even when he is attempting to lay out positive motivation for living it.3

To encourage the confreres, Vincent notes that Jesus loved chastity deeply and desired that the hearts of his followers be filled with it. He willed to be born of a virgin through the power of the Holy Spirit, contrary to the laws of nature, in order to show his great esteem for chastity. He so appreciated this virtue that, though he allowed himself to be accused falsely of many things, he never let his chastity be questioned.4

Vincent often urges on the confreres the importance of growing in chastity and of using prudent precautions, because their work on the missions obliges them to continual contact with lay people of both sexes.5 In his letters he treats a number of practical cases that came up pastorally. He tells the confreres: to be very slow to ask questions about sexual matters in confession;6 not to touch women under any pretext whatsoever, not even to touch the pulse of a sick woman to see if it is time to give the last sacraments;7 to be particularly careful in mission lands because of the different sexual mores of the people there;8 and not to have women as workers in our houses.9

In the Rules and in his conferences, he adds a number of practical directives:

Loyola University, 1929) III, 272. This enormously popular book, published originally at Seville in 1609 and read in many Vincentian novitiates over more than three centuries, is actually less negative than some other writings from the period. Interestingly, St. Vincent (cf. CR IV, 1) uses the same motive expressed by Rodriguez at the beginning of the latter’s treatment of chastity: “So pleasing to God is this virtue that, when the Son of God became man and had to be born of a woman, he chose to be born of a virgin mother, and one consecrated by a vow of chastity, as the saints observe.” Cf. III, 227.

1. Cf. Román, 602-604. Román notes the contrast between Jansenism’s pessimism in regard to human nature and St. Vincent’s vision of the poor person as the image of Christ.
2. Cf. the very interesting account of Vincent’s change in attitude after 1643, in A. Dodin, La Légende et L’Histoire de Monsieur Depaul a saint Vincent de Paul (Paris, 1985) 168.
3. On the other hand, at times St. Vincent speaks quite positively about the spousal relationship between Christ and the Daughter of Charity who pronounces vows. Cf. SV X, 169-70; also X, 618-20.
4. CR IV, 1. St. Vincent comments on this paragraph of the rule in his conference of December 12, 1659; cf. SV XII, 412-24.
5. SV XI, 166. Cf. also SV XI, 209; XII, 416-17.
6. SV I, 547.
7. SV II, 523: “You must be on your guard against using this practice, which the evil spirit can employ to tempt the living as well as the dying...."
8. SV III, 282: “I know how much your heart loves purity,” he writes to Charles Nacquart. “You will have to work hard at it there...."
9. SV IV, 313.
they should keep careful control of their exterior senses (sight, smell, taste, touch, hearing), as well as their interior senses (understanding, memory, will);\textsuperscript{1}
- they should never be alone with a woman at an inappropriate time or place;\textsuperscript{2}
- in talking with or writing to women, they should completely avoid language that is too tender and affectionate; and in speaking with women within or outside confession, they should not get too close;\textsuperscript{3}
- they should drink very little wine and have it well watered;\textsuperscript{4}
- they should not direct women religious,\textsuperscript{5} nor be in the frequent company of the Daughters of Charity, nor enter their rooms;\textsuperscript{6}
- they should not give Missions to nuns, nor receive letters from them under the pretext of giving needed advice.\textsuperscript{7}
- they should never presume on their chastity.\textsuperscript{8}

St. Vincent warns about two vices which are enemies of chastity: intemperance and idleness. He calls intemperance "the nursing mother of unchastity"\textsuperscript{9} and urges the members of the Company to be moderate in what they eat and drink and to use plain foods. He describes idleness as "the enemy of virtue, especially of chastity"\textsuperscript{10} and recommends that they always be usefully occupied.\textsuperscript{11}

On the positive side, humility is an excellent means for acquiring and maintaining chastity.\textsuperscript{12} So also is frequent prayer to Our Lord, the Blessed Virgin,\textsuperscript{13} and the saints.\textsuperscript{14}

Missionaries should live this virtue to such a degree that people will not

\textsuperscript{1} Cf. SV IX, 23; X, 59; X, 246; X, 280; X, 399; XII, 215, on the exterior senses, and X, 151; X, 246; X, 280, on the interior senses. Cf. also SV XI, 209; XII, 418f.
\textsuperscript{2} Cf. SV XII, 419.
\textsuperscript{3} SV XII, 421.
\textsuperscript{4} SV XI, 167
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid. After giving this directive, St. Vincent holds a wonderful dialogue with himself. "'Yes, Sir,' someone may say to me, 'But you certainly do so yourself.' I reply that the Blessed Francis de Sales charged me with the direction of the convent of the Visitation in this city. . . ." He then describes all his efforts (unsuccessful ones!) to get out of this job.
\textsuperscript{6} SV XI, 168.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{8} CR IV, 2.
\textsuperscript{9} CR IV, 3.
\textsuperscript{10} CR IV, 5.
\textsuperscript{11} Cf. SV XII, 420.
\textsuperscript{12} SV XI, 168.
\textsuperscript{13} Cf. SV XI, 220-21, where St. Vincent is speaking to the Daughters: "Saying the rosary is a very beautiful devotion, especially for the Daughters of Charity, who have such a great need for God’s help in order to have the kind of purity that is so necessary for them."
\textsuperscript{14} SV XI, 209: "Let us ask him for this grace. My heart tells me that if we ask him for it earnestly he will have mercy on us."
have even the slightest suspicion about their chastity. Even an unjust suspicion will cause grave harm to the work of the mission, so missionaries should take not just ordinary, but even extraordinary, means to prevent such damage. Consequently, it might be necessary for them to abstain even from some good work if, in the judgment of the superior, it will give rise to suspicions of this sort.¹

**Practice modifying theory**

But if the Rules and conferences have a rather negative ring, Vincent manifests little of this negativity in his own relationship with women. He interpreted the Rules modo humano.

He speaks with great tenderness about many of the women whom he knew and worked closely with, especially Madame de Gondi,² Marguerite Naseau,³ Jane de Chantal,⁴ and Louise de Marillac.⁵ He was the personal friend of the Queen of France (Ann of Austria) and the Queen of Poland (Marie de Gonzague) and a close collaborator with a very large number of Ladies of Charity. His correspondence with St. Louise is strikingly warm. He writes to her in October 1627: “I am writing to you at about midnight and am a little tired. Forgive my heart if it is not a little more expansive in this letter. Be faithful to your faithful lover who is Our Lord. Also be very simple and humble. And I shall be, in the love of Our Lord and his holy mother . . .”⁶ Again, on New Year’s Day, 1638, he writes:

> I wish you a young heart and a love in its first bloom for him Who loves us unceasingly and as tenderly as if he were just beginning to love us. For all God’s pleasures are ever new and full of variety, although he never changes. I am, in his love, with an affection such as his Goodness desires and which I owe him out of love for him, Mademoiselle, your most humble servant . . .”⁷

His letters also contain much concrete, direct advice to those who are troubled. To a brother who wanted to become a Carthusian in order to escape temptations against chastity, he writes: “Of this I assure you: if you are not continent in the Mission, you will not be so anywhere in the world.”⁸ He also

¹. CR IV, 4.
². Cf., especially, SV III, 97.
³. Cf., especially, SV IX, 77.
⁴. Cf., especially, SV XIII, 125.
⁶. SV I, 30.
⁷. SV I, 417-18.
⁸. SV IV, 592-93; cf. also III, 348.
recommends that the brother avoid contact with the person who gave rise to the temptation and that he speak about the problem in spiritual direction. To a priest at Saint-Meen, who was depressed because of troublesome thoughts, he writes: “Your depression will not last. It is like a thick cloud that passes. Man is like the weather, which never stays the same . . . .” He urges this priest to speak openly with his superior, who “is a good missionary, wise and virtuous.” He encourages another priest who is plagued with temptations: “You should not be surprised that you suffer temptations. It is a trial that God sends you to humble you and arouse fear in you. But have confidence in him. His grace will be sufficient, provided that you avoid the occasions. . . . Develop the habit of letting your heart rest in the sacred wounds of Christ. That is a refuge that is inaccessible to the enemy.”

Perhaps most striking of all, and filled with common sense, is the wonderfully warm letter St. Vincent wrote to Jacques Tholard on February 1, 1640. It is a masterpiece of practical moral reasoning combined with compassionate pastoral judgment. Tholard, who was later Visitor of the Province of France and that of Lyons, found himself plagued with temptations while hearing confessions. St. Vincent writes to him:

*That is why the masters of the spiritual life think that these happenings which occur in confession are not sins at all, and do not require in our day that they be confessed. . . . It would be well for you to pass over these matters as lightly as you can. That is the first piece of advice that is usually given, and that one be not troubled when one feels too much pleasure. The second is to try to turn your eyes away from the faces and the other parts of the body of the female sex that cause the temptation. And when the opposite happens, be assured, Monsieur, that it will be when you are not free and your will is weakened by the strength of the temptation. And do not be troubled when you think that is not so.*

1. SV V, 614.
2. SV VIII, 429.
3. Obedience

His teaching

As he did consistently, St. Vincent uses the example of Our Lord as a primary motive when he addresses the priests and brothers about obedience. Jesus, he tells them, obeyed not only Mary and Joseph, but others in positions of authority, both the good and the bad. He constantly submitted himself to his Father's will, even to death. In fact, his whole life was “nothing but a web of obedience.”

In the Rules, Vincent tells the members of the Congregation that they must obey the pope and the bishops of the dioceses in which they work; nor should they do anything in parish churches without the consent of the pastor. They should likewise obey the Superior General “promptly, joyfully, and perseveringly” in all matters that are not clearly sinful. With a certain blind obedience, they should submit their judgment and their will not only to his judgment, but even to his intention. They should always think that what he commands is better and should place themselves at his disposal like a file in the hands of a carpenter.

They owe this same kind of obedience to Visitors, local superiors and other subordinate officials.

They shall also strive to obey the bell as the voice of Christ and respond as soon as they hear it, leaving even a letter of the alphabet unfinished if they are writing.

His letters and conferences make it evident that Vincent attaches great importance to obedience. He tells Lambert aux Couteaux: “I am a child of obedience. It seems to me that, if he (the bishop) should tell me to go to the far end of his diocese and stay there for the rest of my life, I would do it as...
if Our Lord had commanded me, and whatever solitude or job he would give me there would be a foretaste of paradise, since I would be doing the good pleasure of God."¹

For Vincent, obedience involves profound renunciation of judgment and will, and is part of the overall gospel call to self-denial in the following of Christ.²

In order to grow in obedience, missionaries shall develop the habit of "indifference,"³ by observing the Congregation’s long-standing custom of "asking for nothing and refusing nothing."⁴ But if, before God, they really think that something is necessary or, conversely, is doing some harm, they shall lay the matter before the superior. When this has been done, they shall regard the superior’s decision as a certain sign of God’s will and shall acquiesce immediately.

To concretize the practice of obedience, St. Vincent lays down a number of rather detailed norms in the Common Rule:

- everyone shall gather at the designated time and place to hear what the superior has to say about house matters; if they have anything to propose, it should be said then;⁵
- no one shall give commands to others nor correct them, unless delegated by the superior or bound to do it by office;⁶
- no one, after being refused something by one superior, shall go to another about the same matter without telling him about the refusal and the reasons for it;⁷
- even if some legitimate business should arise, no one should abandon some task that has been committed to him, without first telling the superior, so that, if necessary, a substitute can be found;⁸
- no one shall intrude into the duties or ministries of others; but if asked, he shall help out willingly; if, however, this help will occupy much of his time, he shall first seek the permission of the superior;⁹

¹. SV I, 511. Cf. also his strong words to Robert de Sergis (I, 554) and Jean Dehorgny (II, 567). The value St. Vincent sees in obedience comes across quite strikingly in his comments to St. Louise. He writes to her: "Just as a beautiful diamond is worth more than a mountain of stones, so also, an act of compliance and submission is worth more than a number of good works done for others" (SV I, 482). Later, seeing the bad state of her health, he tells her to stay at home, adding that her obedience will be worth more before God than the Mass she wants to attend (SV IV, 182).

². SV XII, 427f.


⁴. CR V, 4.

⁵. CR V, 5.

⁶. CR V, 6.

⁷. CR V, 7.

⁸. CR V, 8.

⁹. CR V, 9.
- no one shall write or send letters, or open letters he has received, without the permission of the superior; when a confrere writes a letter, he shall give it to the superior, who will, as he sees fit, either send it or not;¹
- without general or special permission, no one shall enter another’s room nor even open it unless the other invites him to come in; they will leave the door open while together;²
- no one will let others, especially outsiders, into his room without the permission of the superior;³
- no one shall enter the place set aside for another’s ministry (his office, for example) without the permission of the superior or the one in charge of the place;⁴
- no one shall write a book or translate and publish one, without the expressed permission of the Superior General;⁵
- brothers⁶ shall not aspire to study Latin nor to become clerics; they shall not learn to read or write without the expressed permission of the Superior General;⁷
- as a means toward better health, no one shall eat or drink, outside the usual times, without the permission of the superior;⁸
- the sick should obey their doctors and those taking care of them.⁹

*Practice modifying theory*

While St. Vincent firmly recommended obedience to all superiors, especially to the pope, he was sometimes dogged in trying to get what he wanted, particularly if he thought it vital to the future of his Company. He held steadfast to the interests of the Congregation in the face of resistance on the part of authorities, curial politics, or bureaucratic inertia.

1. CR V, 11.
2. CR V, 13.
3. CR V, 14.
4. CR V, 10.
5. CR V, 15; cf. also his letter to François du Coudray, who was seeking permission to remain in Rome to translate the Syriac Bible into Latin: “Picture to yourself then, sir, that there are millions of souls with outstretched hands calling you . . . !” (SV I, 252).
6. As the recent draft-document entitled “Brothers of the Mission” (sent to the Visitors on April 15, 1989) points out, St. Vincent, “influenced at times by the attitudes of his era about brothers in religious and apostolic communities but guided at other times by his own instincts about the need to respect persons and evaluate them as they really are, frequently comes across admirably to us, but sometimes is also disconcerting.”
7. CR V, 16.
8. CR V, 12.
9. CR VI, 3.
This is quite evident in his efforts to obtain approval for the vows to be pronounced in the Congregation. And in fact, he was successful in getting his way! "In Rome," he states, quoting Commander de Sillery, "everything can be achieved with time and patience." He encourages René Alméras, his negotiator in Rome. "This is a cloud that will pass. The day will come when the Company will be more acceptable and when those who can do good for it will have more charity toward it than they now have."

He even forwarded to Alméras Cardinal Grimaldi's suggestion to use a little money to facilitate negotiations! But he regretted having done this. He thanks Alméras for having opposed him on the matter and adds, "I wrote that crooked proposition to you only because it was suggested to me by Cardinal Grimaldi, and once more I assure you that I am very edified that you refused it."

"Get the bulls at any price and in the best possible form," he tells Edme Jolly in 1658.

In fact, he came to regard careful negotiations with authorities as one of the ways of honoring providence. He writes to Edme Jolly in Rome in 1658: "You are one of the few men who honor the providence of God more by the preparation of remedies against foreseen evils. I thank you very humbly for this and pray that Our Lord will continue to enlighten you more and more so that such enlightenment may spread through the Company." It is also evident from his correspondence with Jolly that he wanted him to be firm in pressing his points with the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide.

He could also be quite firm with bishops who made demands that were contrary to the practice of the Congregation (e.g., that missionaries submit an account of their financial affairs to the local ordinary). Only ten days before his death, he writes to the Archbishop of Narbonne, who was seeking both the right to look at the accounts and to dismiss members of the Congregation from the seminary staff: "Your Excellency would greatly oblige us if you drew up the deed of agreement in the same way as the other French and Italian bishops have done."

1. SV XIII, 336.
2. SV III, 453.
3. SV III, 486.
4. SV III, 247.
5. SV VII, 310.
6. SV VII, 331.
4. Stability

His teaching

The reader will look in vain for an extended treatment of stability in the Common Rules or in the extant conferences of St. Vincent, though he does often speak of Christ’s using the “weapons” of poverty, chastity, and obedience “even to death” and of the need for the missionary to persevere “even to death.”

Yet stability is at the root of much of what St. Vincent thought, said and wrote about the vows. It pains him deeply that some of the best missionaries leave. Perseverance, he tells Fr. Alméras, is one of the principal motives for his seeking to have the members of the Company pronounce vows. He felt very strongly about the matter. “There is no better way to assure our eternal happiness than to live and die in the service of the poor within the arms of providence and in a real renunciation of ourselves by following Jesus Christ,” he writes to Jean Barreau on December 4, 1648.

On October 16, 1658, he wrote to two confreres, both in the house at Troyes, who were experiencing vocational struggles. He tells Jacques de la Fosse: “When we think about another state of life, we picture for ourselves only what is pleasant in it, but when we are actually there, we experience only what is troublesome in it and what runs contrary to nature. Remain in peace, Father, and continue your voyage to heaven in the boat in which God has placed you. That is what I hope from his goodness and from the desire which you have to do his Will.” To Jacques Tholard, he further states: “If you have succeeded in remaining for twenty years in the Company, you will remain yet another twenty or thirty years in it, since things will not be more difficult in the future than they were in the past. In binding yourself to God exactly as the others do, not only will you edify them, but Our Lord will bind himself more closely than ever to you, and he will be your strength in your weakness; he will be your joy in your sorrow; and he will be your stability in your wavering.”

It is evident that, even in St. Vincent’s lifetime, missionaries who did not

2. SV I, 551: “I have just now seen a member of the Company, one of the very best among us . . . who is determined to leave . . . without giving me any particular reason.”
3. SV III, 392. St. Vincent speaks equally strongly with the Daughters of Charity (SV IX, 625-26): "Without perseverance, everything is lost . . ." Cf. also IX, 637: “The one who does not persevere to the end does not receive a reward.”
5. SV VII, 294.
work directly with the poor, but rather in seminaries, felt some tension in regard to this vow, since it was formulated in terms of dedicating oneself, for the whole time of one’s life, to the salvation of the poor country people. In 1654 Vincent responds to a question posed by François Fournier, saying that such confreres fulfill their vow, first of all, by holding themselves ready to go to the poor at the slightest indication and, secondly, by working for the poor indirectly since they are forming good priests who will themselves then go to the poor.¹

In various contexts, St. Vincent speaks of diverse “enemies” of perseverance in the Company, especially the failure to rise early,² lack of prayer,³ and neglect of the practice of poverty.⁴

**Practice modifying theory**

St. Vincent was very eager that good confreres keep their commitments. He sometimes pleaded with them to stay or to return. In 1646, in a remarkable letter to Thomas Berthe, he makes an eloquent appeal:⁵ “Come back, Father. I conjure you by the promise you made to God to live and die in the Company. . . .” The following month he makes a further plea: “I will have more confidence in you than ever (if you come back), because I will no longer be afraid of losing you, having seen you saved from such a dangerous reef. Choose any house you please. You will be received everywhere with open arms. . . .”⁶

But in fact, he was sometimes happy when other confreres left. He tells René Alméras that we should regard the departure of some persons as something good for the Congregation.⁷ In his diary, Jean Gicquel describes St. Vincent’s reaction (just eight days before his death) when Achille Le-Vazeux departed: “O my Savior, what a grace you have given us in unloading someone like him, brilliant to the point of pride and haughtiness!”⁸ . . . Fr. Vincent for the next four or five days repeated several times at each meeting: “What a reason for thanking God for having delivered us. . . !”⁹

Similarly, it is evident that he was glad to let Chrétien Daisne leave¹⁰ and was more than eager to get rid of Brother Doutrelet, whose departure, he

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¹. SV V, 81.
². SV III, 538; IX, 29; X, 566.
³. SV III, 539; IX, 416; X, 583; XI, 83.
⁴. SV XI, 79, 223.
⁵. SV III, 88.
⁶. SV XIII, 118.
⁷. SV III, 379.
⁸. SV XIII, 186-87.
⁹. SV VII, 354.
states, God will use “to make the Congregation survive.”1 When five confreres left in 1642 and two were expelled, he reflects on the event in a letter to François Dufestel,2 saying, “this kind would hurt us more in the battle than they would help.”

Nor, failing to find sufficient reason to dispense a troublesome student confrere from his vows, was he loath to suggest putting pressure on him, hoping that he might change his ways, but foreseeing that he might leave.3 He suggests depriving him of wine at table or even locking him in a room!

As one might expect, he was even more decisive in dismissing those not yet in vows. “We have purged and re-purged the seminary,” he tells Jean Dehorgny while informing him that thirty remained in the internal seminary.4 But later, in 1657, he admonishes the director of the seminary for being too harsh.5 He seems quite concerned that directors be realistic in their expectations and that they lead the seminarists step by step.6

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1. SV III, 379.
2. SV II, 287.
3. SV VII, 210: “… it will be a relief for it (the Congregation) to be rid of someone incorrigible.”
4. SV II, 489. The number of seminarists was rather large at that time. Two years earlier St. Vincent mentioned that there were 36 or 38, adding (II, 323): “I think that Our Lord grants this because he sees in the Congregation some determination in purging the incorrigible.”
5. SV VI, 385-88.
PART II - HORIZON-SHIFTS BETWEEN THE SEVENTEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES

In the last chapter, when discussing the five characteristic virtues, I briefly described six horizon-shifts that have taken place between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries, which inevitably influence the way we look at St. Vincent’s teaching today: 1) a change in philosophical and theological methodology; 2) increasing consciousness of interdependence; 3) a changed paradigm for the exercise of authority; 4) emphasis on a Christology and an ecclesiology “from below”; 5) a shift toward a more positive attitude in regard to creation and toward less emphasis on sin; 6) a transition from the “era of Christendom” to the “era of the secular.” Here, I will further develop the notion of “horizon-shifts” and will describe briefly some additional ways in which modern thought-processes have changed since the time of St. Vincent.

Horizon-shifts, whether we react to them favorably or unfavorably, necessarily have an impact on the way we interpret reality. If we look out on a broad plain from a vantage-point half-way up a mountain, we see more of it than we did while on the ground, though we may see it in less detail. If we climb to the top of the mountain, the vista may broaden further: we might view the entire plain or we might even be able to see over the top of the next mountain; still, we may also no longer be able to distinguish some of the people below, or the buildings, or the trees nearly so clearly as we did when we were lower on the mountain. But if we descend to the foot of the mountain again, we can see nothing of what lies beyond the next series of mountains nor can we see much of the plain; yet we do see the nearby people, buildings and trees quite clearly. And from down below, we might even have a better view of the mountainside than when we were actually on it.

As is obvious from the metaphor, horizon-shifts bear with them losses and gains. Sometimes the gains vastly outweigh the losses; sometimes, vice-versa. But inevitably they affect our way of interpreting reality.

As we attempt to interpret the meaning of St. Vincent’s teaching on the vows and seek to reinterpret it today, it is imperative that we be aware of the horizon-shifts that have taken place since the seventeenth century. Otherwise, the Vincent de Paul that we offer to others will be merely a still photo from the past, rather than a living, relevant teacher; or, a corpse rather than vibrant saint.

At the heart of interpretation is meaning. We must attempt to find the meaning of St. Vincent’s teaching as he presented it in a seventeenth-century form and express it in twentieth-century forms which will be capable of
mediating it to our contemporaries (but, first of all, to ourselves). Of course, not all seventeenth-century forms are irrelevant today; many practices which St. Vincent suggested are still apt means for expressing the values he sought. Yet, just as many languages cease to exist as a living word capable of communicating meaning, so also some of the practices that were once suitable vehicles for expressing values in St. Vincent's time are no longer capable of doing so now. In those cases, the challenge is to find or create new forms that will do the job.¹

A preparatory document,² meant to stimulate discussion for the 1990 Synod, mentioned a number of significant changes in mentality that inevitably affect us today, both for good and for bad. In a similar vein, I will here briefly touch on several horizon-shifts,³ in addition to those described in the last chapter, which have an impact on the way we view the vows.

As I write about horizon-shifts, I am conscious of an enormous limitation. Not everyone living at the same historical moment lives in the same "world."⁴ Horizons vary greatly from east to west and from north to south. The cultural, philosophical, and theological backgrounds of people living in India, for example, are significantly different from those living in Europe or North America.⁵ Nonetheless, recognizing this limitation, I offer these thoughts,

1. Putting all this in traditional language, one might say that the challenge is to find the substance of the four vows, to put aside those concrete ("accidental") forms that are no longer appropriate for mediating that substance in the modern world, and to find contemporary forms which will embody it more readily. In his essays on spirituality, Karl Rahner suggests the distinction between "material" and "formal" imitation of Christ. In the former, one focuses on the concrete things that Jesus did and tries to do them, without realizing the extent to which everything he did was conditioned by his historical context. In "formal" imitation, one seeks to find the core or meaning of what Jesus said or did and then seeks to apply that in the contemporary context. Other writers distinguish between "imitation of Christ" (which tends to emphasize "material" imitation) and the "following of Christ" (which tends to emphasize "formal" imitation).

2. Lineamenta, "The Formation of Priests in Circumstances of the Present Day," for the use of Episcopal Conferences, in preparation for the Synod of 1990 (Vatican City, 1989) 10-11. Among the changes which it describes is the "modern character" of western culture, with its rejection of absolute norms, a tendency to reduce all things to technology, and widespread secularization.


4. Cf. Lineamenta #5: "The unique aspects of the socio-cultural environment in relation to the different 'worlds' must be considered as well as their impact on formation and on the exercise of mission. Even if the changes of the western world affect other parts of the world through the influence of the mass-media and the migration of peoples, these 'worlds' nevertheless still retain some of their own qualities." Cf. also #29.

5. The problem is actually more complex because, as Karl Rahner points out, not even all those living in the same place at the same time are really "contemporaries."
writing from my own time and place in history, attempting to make adjustments based on my limited knowledge of other cultures, and trusting that others will complete the task for their own cultures.

It is also important to point out that horizon-shifts, especially of the sweeping Copernican type, only slowly take root within the minds of those living at a given point in history. Old paradigms die slowly. To the end of their lives, some persons will continue to act and react as if no change at all has taken place.¹

Let me describe briefly here a few additional horizon-shifts that are relevant for our study of the vows.

1. The transition from an industrial society to an information society

Since the time of St. Vincent, the western world has witnessed the transition from an agrarian to an industrial to an information society. The last-mentioned change, toward a society based largely on the creation and distribution of information, is still very much in process today. It brings with it lights and shadows, gifts and burdens.

On the one hand, advances in communication provide the opportunity for the rapid dissemination of information. Computers enable us to solve in seconds problems that formerly cost us months of work or were even insoluble. Television instantaneously brings events and entertainment right into the living-room.

But the blessing has sometimes been a very mixed one. The same information that enables society to save lives also enables it to destroy them. Nor does every form of entertainment beamed into the community recreation room or the local theater really "build up the Body of Christ." Much discernment is needed. The information explosion challenges society as a whole, and religious communities in particular, to reflective, responsible, critical moral thinking. Not everything that can be done should be done; not everything that can be produced should be produced.

In an information society, moreover, the demands on those in authority are great. People want to know what is happening. They want to have their say in it. And they know that the means for both are available.

But while "high technology" (especially through computerization) makes more and more advances, "high touch" in governance and relationships is

also more and more in demand. Perhaps even because so much of life and work has become impersonalized, people seek deeper human relationships. They want to see and talk with their superiors face to face. They call for a community life that is not merely functional, but personal.

All this presents enormous challenges for those living community life, especially for those in authority.

2. The movement from national economies toward a world economy

The writings of John XXIII, Paul VI, and John Paul II have been marked by a strong emphasis on the need for a global world-view. Social encyclicals and the writings of many bishops criticize the ever-widening gap between the rich nations and the poor nations. Economic policy based predominantly on nationalism is viewed as an enemy of the global community.

This changing perspective creates extremely complex challenges for society. On the international level, the need for a more just “international economic order” is often spoken of. An individual nation cannot just consider its own economic goals in isolation from the community of nations. People are, moreover, increasingly conscious that short-range planning must give way to longer-range views and that the short-sighted resolution of one problem (e.g., the need for energy) sometimes produces even greater ones (e.g., the pollution of the air, the rivers, the sea).

In the politico-economic order, the need to enter the world economy has clearly been one of the principal factors in the recent literal breakdown of the wall dividing East and West. The nations of Eastern Europe are struggling to integrate themselves into and share in a world economy.

Naturally, this movement creates challenges for religious communities too. Those dedicated to the poor recognize that short-term assistance to a poor person, while necessary, does not really get to the heart of the matter. There are unjust social structures that keep poor people poor. Consequently, there is a demand for social analysis. It is in this light that John Paul II called the members of the Congregation of the Mission, during the General Assembly of 1986, to “search out more than ever, with boldness, humility and skill, the causes of poverty and encourage long and short term solutions, which are concrete, flexible and efficacious.”

Congregations are also conscious that the investment of their funds not

2. I distinguish here between nationalism and a healthy patriotism.
only has implications for the community’s future, but also has a moral, and
sometimes economic, impact on society as a whole. As a result, numerous
religious communities have established advisory boards which review their
investments and make recommendations on how to exercise their voting
power as stock holders, or subscribe to international or regional services
which do this.

Many congregations too are increasingly conscious of their international
color, with the varied cultures, languages, religious backgrounds,
economic and political systems of their members. Dialogue and decision-
making in such a context are experienced as highly delicate processes. The
problem becomes all the more complicated when some provinces are per-
ceived as “rich” and others as “poor.”

3. The shift from North to South

During the fifteen-year pontificate of Paul VI, a striking shift took place
in the Church’s statistical center of gravity. The turning point arrived in 1970:
fifty-one percent of the Catholic population was living in the southern
continents. By the year 2,000, seventy percent of all Catholics will be in the
southern hemisphere.1 Walbert Bühlmann calls this the “coming of the third
Church.”2

In an existential sense, Catholicism is becoming truly a “world-church,”
as Karl Rahner pointed out on many occasions.3

Many religious communities are experiencing this dramatically. In our
own Congregation, for example, while there are fewer vocations in western
Europe and North America, where formerly they flourished, the Company is
growing not only in Poland, but also in the Philippines, India, Indonesia,
Colombia, Mexico, Central America, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Zaire, Mozambique
and Madagascar.

For the Congregation, the opportunities and the challenges are enormous.
The confreres from these countries enrich the Congregation with their own
cultures and religious traditions. They often, for example, bring us an
experience of life lived out continually in intimate contact with the poor.
Such provinces frequently have active, even thriving, programs for mini-

1976).
Investigations XX, 90-102; cf. also “The Future of the Church and the Church of the Future,”
in Theological Investigations XX, 103-14.
sterial formation among both the clergy and the laity. But they also express two striking needs: 1) the need for trained personnel to carry on the work of our own formation; 2) the need for further inculturation, so that the Christianity and culture might interact with one another at a deeper level, both enriching and purifying each other. Rahner points out that the globalization of theology is one of the greatest needs of the Church in the years ahead. He notes that up to the present there has been an unfortunate tendency to “canonize” what was really only a manifestation of the thought patterns of western culture.1

Right now, many growing, younger provinces, and particularly those responsible for formation within them, face the difficult challenge of teaching philosophy and theology (so often formulated in a European or North American context) in an African or Asian or South American or Pacific Island setting. Similarly, they search for the appropriate forms for expressing poverty, chastity, obedience, and life-long commitment to the poor within cultures very different not only from St. Vincent’s, but also from those of the writers of most of the philosophy, theology, and spiritual reading books written up until recent times.

Along these same lines, the place of women in society and the social mores in relating to them vary greatly from north to south and, in both hemispheres, from continent to continent. To talk with a woman on the street may be as “natural” in Los Angeles as it is “scandalous” in Mecca.

4. Further changes in the paradigms for exercising authority

The discontent that until recently pulsated mostly beneath the surface in China, Russia, Poland, and most of Eastern Europe has now exploded dramatically. Through both peaceful and violent means, people are seeking, and obtaining, greater voice in their own governments.

In a more orderly way (though the experience was sometimes also quite dramatic), the Church has been experiencing a similar phenomenon over the past three decades. In the last chapter, I briefly described the shift from a monarchical to a collegial model of authority in the Church. This paradigm-shift is still very much in process. In community life, it is taking a number of concrete shapes.

One can note, first, a movement from the desire for representation to the desire for participation. With the possibility of rapid communication, people are often not satisfied with decision-making processes that involve just the

provincial and his council or even an elected provincial assembly, especially if the decisions to be made affect the lives of all members of a province intimately. They expect to be consulted personally on all important matters concerning their future. At times too, in matters of major importance, they expect all the members of the province to be consulted. Along these lines, we witness today the development of some rather sophisticated, detailed consultation processes. We also witness the advent of general meetings of the whole province, either alongside or occasionally in place of elected provincial assemblies.

Secondly, alongside hierarchical structures, there is a tendency toward much greater “networking,” sometimes at the initiative of the hierarchy itself and sometimes as a result of a call “from below.” Much of the networking has already been institutionalized in the Code of Canon Law (diocesan synods, presbyteral councils, pastoral councils, etc.) and in the Constitutions, Statutes, and Provincial Norms of various communities (assemblies, house meetings, local community plans, provincial plans, etc.).

Thirdly, contemporary society offers fewer either/or choices but, rather, proposes multiple options. Such options are often a product of the information society and of advanced technology, which has the capacity to propose and explore different possibilities. Groups, as they begin long-range planning, often speak today of various “scenarios,” based on different hypotheses. In religious communities too, the exploration of multiple options is now a frequent part of life, especially in consultation concerning future assignments. Moreover, interest surveys of all the confreres of a province are often used as a tool in planning for the future.

Lest the reader be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the changes described above, it may be helpful to note the comment of a contemporary writer:

*In some ways, persons directly serving the Church are better prepared for the megatrends than the average person, because they have not been employed by industry but rather have been working in service-related occupations that can be more easily integrated into an information society. Furthermore, if they have been active in the Roman Catholic Church during the past twenty years, they already have experienced major changes.*

1. Hayden, 14.
PART III - THE FOUR VINCENTIAN VOWS RETRIEVED

In this section I will follow the order used in article 28 of the Constitutions and in the Program for Vincentian Formation in the Major Seminary; the sequence employed in these more recent documents is different from that of the Common Rules and reflects, at least to some extent, a different perspective on the vows.

In reflecting on each vow, I will offer considerations “toward a contemporary understanding” and “toward a contemporary practice.” I am eager to stimulate further dialogue and writing “toward” such an understanding and practice. But in doing so, I am aware, as many recent documents point out, that such theoretical considerations will have a genuine life-giving influence on others, especially on those in formation, only if they are accompanied by the witness of wise, healthy role-models, whose lives speak more forcefully than their teaching.

As a final preliminary remark, let me note here (so as not to repeat it again and again) the importance of two factors in re-interpreting the vows today. Both are strongly emphasized in contemporary Church documents and both were of enormous importance to St. Vincent: 1) the missionary dimension of the vows, which has received much attention since *Evangelii Nuntiandi*; and, 2) the Church's preferential option for the poor and her prophetic call to justice in solidarity with them. A contemporary writer expresses the latter point in this way:

So crucial is this issue of justice for the poor that the revitalization of religious life cannot be considered today, if there is no concern for the exploited and the “little people” of this world. Religious are to be more radical Christians, in the sense of struggling to live the life and holiness of the Church in all its radicalness and integrity. There can be no radicalness without concern for the poor.

1. The order used in art. 28 of the Constitutions changes in articles 29-39, where stability is placed last.
2. The order for considering the vows, however, is really quite disputable (and of relatively minor importance). Historically, it has been quite varied. Cf. Lineamenta #12, for a different order.
1. Stability

Toward a contemporary understanding

a. In the earliest days of religious life (as well as in the first three years or so of the Congregation), there were no explicit vows.

At the beginning of the history of religious life, a person was incorporated into a community when he made a deliberate decision to enter the particular group, was received (after some probation) by a superior, and was clothed in the religious habit. A simple, stark ceremony that embraced these three elements expressed the person's willingness to renounce everything for the Lord's sake and for the sake of his kingdom. There were no vows, but rather a single, underlying commitment (expressed in the simple ceremony of reception): explicit, total dedication to the Lord and his service, as lived out in the life of the community. Implicitly this involved living a life of chastity, poverty, and obedience.

We might call this primitive, underlying reality, which lies at the heart of religious life, “the one vow” (which later became explicitated into three or four vows). At its core lies: 1) single-minded focus on the Lord; 2) firm commitment to the following of Christ, with its radical demands (the willingness to renounce human ties, worldly goods, one's own preferences, even


2. St. Vincent made it quite clear that we are not religious; our secular identity is also most evident in our contemporary documents (cf. C 3 §2). For that reason, I have attempted to avoid using the word “religious” when referring directly to the Congregation. But it is impossible to avoid the word in the broader context of the history of the vows because of their connection with “religious,” strictly speaking. Much of the spirit and some of the practices of religious vows apply to us. In this context, it is also important to note what St. Vincent wrote to Jeanne de Chantal in 1639 (I, 562-63): “And because you wish to know what constitutes our humble way of life, I shall tell you then, most worthy Mother . . . that most of us have made the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, and a fourth to devote ourselves all our life to the assistance of the poor common people; . . . and that we practice poverty and obedience, and try, by God’s mercy, to live in a religious manner, even though we are not religious.”

one’s own life, for the service of the kingdom of God); 3) the primacy of agape, a love of friendship and service; 4) faith and hope in the kingdom, with its life that conquers death.

With time, this “one vow,” so to speak, came to be concretized in several vows.

This was, on the one hand, a natural development. Societies and individuals tend to make more explicit, with the hope of deepening them, commitments that were formerly implicit. So, for example, in some early novitiates, a rule of life was read to the new members and a promise of obedience began to be demanded of them. In the time of Basil we find a public profession of virginity. Later, various triads arise. By the seventh century, in John Climacus, we find mention of professing poverty, chastity and obedience.

But the process was also a defensive one, especially in the time of Basil and Benedict. As abuses arose, people were asked to make an explicit profession of what formerly everyone had taken for granted. In that way, no one could say that he did not know what he was getting into!

Seen from this point of view, the three or four vows are really a way of expressing a single underlying reality that is deeper. This helps us understand the role of the vows in the mind of St. Vincent. Basically, he saw them as a way of radicalizing and deepening the missionaries’ commitment to follow Christ the Evangelizer of the Poor (the positive function of the vows) and also as a way of stabilizing our commitment to the Company, with its life and its apostolic goals (their defensive function).

b. When examined further, it is evident that the vows also have both an incarnational and an eschatological thrust.

Looked at from an incarnational perspective, our four vows, as St. Vincent loved to point out, are rooted in the humanity of Christ. By the vow of stability we commit ourselves to follow Christ the Evangelizer of the Poor, as members of the Congregation, for the whole of our lives. The vow of poverty pledges us, with the poor Christ, to share what we have with the poor and to hold all in common with our brothers in community. The celibate life-style provides us the opportunity, as it did Jesus, for greater mobility, time for prayer, and the freedom to serve many brothers and sisters. Obedience in the footsteps of Christ enables us as an apostolic society to seek the will of the Father and to mobilize our forces and concentrate them on our apostolic goals.

Looked at from an eschatological perspective, poverty places us in radical dependence on God, who is the source of all genuine happiness. Celibacy is a sign that we believe in a future that goes beyond family and children.

Obedience signifies our willingness to be servants of the kingdom. Stability proclaims that there is a meaning to life that goes deeper than the surface, that there is an order of things that reverses the conventional wisdom, that the poor are the rich in the kingdom of God. In this sense, vows often contradict “conventional wisdom.” They make us different from the “world,” but in doing so they reveal the deepest meaning of the world.

The incarnational and transcendental aspects of the vows cannot be adequately distinguished; consequently, it is a mistake to separate them or, in a spirituality, to neglect the one or the other. Alone, neither fully expresses the meaning of the vows. In fact, the transcendent is expressed only in and through the incarnational, while the incarnational finds its deepest ground and its ultimate goal only in the transcendent.

Because the vows do have a profoundly transcendent dimension, we sometimes describe them as having a sharp “counter-cultural” tendency. This terminology may not be completely accurate, since one of the deepest currents of Catholicism is its continual dialogue and interplay with culture; consequently, in the Catholic tradition the pertinent question regarding a given culture is always: which things are we to honor and cherish, and which are we to counter and deplore? But, apart from the terminology, it is certainly true that those who pronounce vows must squarely face, within the context of their own culture, the renunciation that they involve. In a society where the media frequently promote “instant gratification” in regard to material goods, sexual pleasure, and self-realization, the “delayed gratification” signified by the faithfully-lived vowed life runs very much against the grain, not only of society, but of the individual making the commitment. Vows, therefore, involve an asceticism which we are called to live out in joy as a response to God’s gift.

c. Given this background, it is easier to understand why St. Vincent considered stability as so basic. He saw that many generous men came to serve the poor in the Congregation, but he soon experienced that many, faced with difficulties, also left. So for the better part of two decades he labored to introduce a stabilizing element into his confreres’ spirituality which would strengthen them in giving not just one or two years to following Christ as the Evangelizer of the Poor, but their whole lives. In that sense, stability was the basic vow for St. Vincent.

d. In describing this commitment, the “Program for Vincentian Formation in the Major Seminary” states that we vow:

... stability, which entails fidelity to God, who call us to commit ourselves to evangelize the poor in the Vincentian community for our whole lives.¹

Like all vows made in societies within the Church, stability involves fidelity to God, as well as fidelity to a word spoken in the presence of the community. The specific content of this covenanted word is a promise to: 1) evangelize the poor; 2) in the Congregation of the Mission; 3) until death.

Toward a contemporary practice

Today, stability in living out commitments is particularly difficult, not just in religious life but in marriage as well. Many of the societal supports that once reinforced commitments have vanished. Since 1965, large numbers of religious have left their congregations. In recent years this wave of departures has receded somewhat, but a steady, slower stream of withdrawals persists. The reasons why people have left are varied and complex. I must leave it to others to examine them in detail. But apart from the reasons, the fact remains: the challenge of stability is a huge one today.

Later, under celibacy, I will mention six stabilizing factors that are of great help for living out our vowed commitment perseveringly and joyfully. Besides those, let me here mention four other means for growing in stability:

1. Accepting the Lord’s love

A number of superiors and those responsible for formation programs today attest that a negative self-image is the root of many of the problems with which members of communities struggle. This being the case, let me suggest that, along with healthy, loving human relationships, acceptance of the Lord’s love is a key factor in the self-acceptance that grounds stability. For many, work or achievements or prestigious positions in the community unfortunately play a disproportionate role in their feeling valued personally. But in the long run, genuine self-worth rests on a consciousness of the deep personal love of the Lord as Creator and Redeemer.

Meditation on some striking scriptural texts concerning the Lord’s personal love for us is a very helpful means for growing in awareness of that love. In his struggles to be faithful, Moses, pleading for light and strength, heard these words from the Lord (cf. Ex 33:7-17):

This request, too, which you have just made, I will carry out, because you have found favor with me and you are my intimate friend.

¹ Program #14a; cf. also C 28; 39.
Among many other texts on which it might be helpful to meditate throughout our lives, I would suggest: Dt 1:29-33; 7:7-11; 8:5-10; 11: 10-17; 32:10-11; Is 43:1-7; 49:14-16; 54:5-10; 55; Hos 11:1-9; Ps 103; 139; 145; Lk 7:36-50; 12:22-32; 15:11-32; Jn 3:16-17; 14:14-28; Eph 1:3-14; Jas 1:17-18; 1 Jn 4:9-10.

John Donne beautifully expresses the connection between stability and being captured by God:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Take me to you, imprison me, for I,} \\
&\text{Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,} \\
&\text{Nor ever chaste except you ravish me.}^1
\end{align*}
\]

2. Being grateful for God’s gifts, especially for one’s calling to serve the poor.

St. Vincent was utterly convinced that we should be grateful for our calling. “Let us give thanks to God for this happy choice!” he cried out on December 6, 1658, during his conference on the end of the Congregation.\(^2\) Through solidarity with the poor we will share their lot, and in doing so, we will also share in the promise of the beatitudes: they are truly happy who are poor in spirit, who hunger and thirst for justice. The Lord blesses not just the poor themselves, but their friends.\(^3\)

Expressing our gratitude to the Lord is the basic meaning of what we do when we celebrate the eucharist. Active participation, with a grateful heart, will both reflect and deepen our dependence on him.

Expressing to others a similar gratitude for our calling will be a sign that we really do believe deeply in the “new order of things,” in which the poor are first and in which serving them is a gift that we have received in joyful faith.

One of the practical signs of gratitude for our calling is the willingness to share the gift, by encouraging others to join in this same happy calling. In that light, vocational promotion both expresses and deepens our commitment to serve the poor in the Congregation for the whole of our lives.\(^4\)

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1. *Holy Sonnets*, V.
2. SV XII, 77.
3. Cf. SV XI, 392: “God loves the poor, and consequently he loves those who love the poor. For when you love someone deeply, you have affection for his friends and his servants.”
4. In his later years, as he became more concerned about the survival of the Company, St. Vincent began to take a more active interest in vocations. In 1655, he writes to Etienne Blatiron (SV V, 462-63): “I thank God for the special devotions you have committed yourself to in order to ask God, through blessed St. Joseph, for the spread of the Company. I beg his divine goodness to accept them. For twenty years I never dared to ask for this, thinking that, as the Congregation was his work, care for its conservation and growth should be left only
Another practical sign of gratitude for our calling is encouragement of those struggling with difficulties. Experience says that most, at one time or another, find themselves confused, wandering, uncertain where to turn. Dante, speaking of the “middle years,” puts it strikingly:

Midway upon the journey of our life  
I found myself within a forest dark,  
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.  
Ah me! how hard a thing it is to say  
What was this forest savage, rough, and stern,  
Which in the very thought reneweth the fear.  
So bitter is it, death is little more.¹

In such times supportive listening and friendship on the part of someone who is grateful for his own calling can be the sustaining force that enables others to persevere. It also can be a source of growth for the listener.

3. Avoiding bitterness, negative criticism

One of the strongest enemies of community is bitterness and negative criticism. They corrode the heart of the individual and eat away at the life of the group. St. Benedict was so aware of this that he prescribed flogging for those who were habitual gripers! St. Vincent too recognized it as a plague that the Congregation must avoid contracting.³

Right from the start, then, it is important to learn the ways of channeling criticism constructively, of not allowing small issues to become burning ones, of creating the processes for constructive dialogue. More will be said in this regard when discussing the active involvement that contemporary obedience demands of us.

— to his providence. But from thinking about the recommendation given in the gospel to ask him to send workers into his harvest I have become convinced of the importance and usefulness of this devotion. ¹

2. Rule of Benedict, ch. 23.  
3. SV IX, 75, 122; X, 432-33; XII, 456, 473; cf. Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity, 31 (the version used by St. Vincent, as found in the CEME edition: Salamanca, 1989, 124): “... above all, they will avoid murmuring about the way the superior or superioress acts, or about the Rules and good customs of the Company, because that kind of murmuring is capable of bringing down a curse from God, both on the person who murmurs and on the one who listens to her eagerly, and even on the whole Company on account of the great scandal it causes.”
4. Renewing one’s commitment frequently

A good means used by many throughout the history of the Congregation and of other communities is to renew one’s vowed commitment frequently. Some choose to do this even daily; others do it on the occasion of significant events or anniversaries.

In renewing their commitment, some simply repeat the vow formula they originally used. Some use their own words. Some use the words of the saints. There are many such prayers or formulas that can help. Some might find themselves attracted, for example, by St. Vincent’s prayer:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{We are weak, O God,} \\
\text{and capable of giving in at the first assault.} \\
\text{By your pure loving kindness} \\
\text{you have called us;} \\
\text{may your infinite goodness, please,} \\
\text{now help us persevere.} \\
\text{For our part, with your holy grace,} \\
\text{we will try with all our strength} \\
\text{to summon up} \\
\text{all the service and all the faithfulness} \\
\text{that you ask of us.} \\
\text{So give us, O God, give us the grace} \\
\text{to persevere until death.} \\
\text{This is what I ask of you} \\
\text{through the merits of Our Lord Jesus Christ} \\
\text{with confidence that you will remember me.}\end{align*}
\]

Others may easily identify with St. Ignatius’ renewal of commitment, often recommended by the Church:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Lord Jesus Christ,} \\
\text{take all my freedom,} \\
\text{my memory, my understanding, and my will.} \\
\text{All that I have and cherish} \\
\text{you have given me.} \\
\text{I surrender it all to be guided by your will.} \\
\text{Your grace and your love} \\
\text{are wealth enough for me.} \\
\text{Give me these, Lord Jesus,} \\
\text{and I ask for nothing more.}
\end{align*}
\]

1. SV IX, 360.
2. Chastity

Toward a contemporary understanding\(^1\)

For the modern reader, what St. Vincent says about chastity may seem much too negative, restrictive, outdated. The modern world has a considerably more positive view of relationships between men and women than did the writers of the seventeenth century. We find it unsettling that so much of what St. Vincent writes is couched in precautions and a pessimistic view of human nature.\(^2\)

At the same time we know that chaste celibate living\(^3\) is quite as much a challenge in our day as it was in his, perhaps even more so. Yet, in today’s context, we prefer to express that challenge in a more positive way even if, in evaluating things honestly, we must acknowledge that, for varied reasons, we sometimes fail to meet the challenge.

But moving beyond the language and rhetoric characteristic of the seventeenth century, it is important for us to attempt to express the meaning of and the means for living celibate love so that it makes sense for us today.

a. Of course, celibacy, like every way of following Jesus, is all about loving. The “Program for Vincentian Formation in the Major Seminary” puts it this way:

\[
\text{(We vow) chastity, lived out wholeheartedly in celibacy, which leads us to open our hearts more and more to God and to the neighbor, without discrimination (CR IV, 1; C 29; 30), and which we receive as a gift from God and as a way of following Christ who gave himself up for all of us and loved us unreservedly).} \quad 4
\]

Notice the elements in the description: 1) chaste celibate love is a gift from God; 2) this gift calls us to a two-fold response—to allow ourselves to be more and more captured by God and to be more and more immersed in love of the neighbor, without discrimination; 3) the revelation of the gift and the

\(^1\) For the basic ideas presented in recent Church documents, cf. PC 12; ET 13-15; PO 16; \textit{Sacerdotalis Caelibatus} (June 24, 1967); Canon 599; \textit{Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes} (February 2, 1990) 13.

\(^2\) Cf. R. Deville, \textit{op. cit.}, 173ff., on the pessimism that characterized the spirituality of St. Vincent’s time.

\(^3\) Without delaying here to debate the terminology, I will use the terms “chaste celibate living” and “chaste celibate love” to describe our calling rather than simply “chastity.” As is evident to the reader, the latter term is more general and describes the gospel call to all Christians. Nor will I enter here into the much discussed issue of the canonical requirement that all priests in the Latin rite make a commitment to celibacy. The focus in this article is on the vow to live a chaste, celibate life which priests and brothers are called to make freely as members of the Congregation of the Mission.

\(^4\) \textit{Vincentiana} 32 (1988) 164 #14c.
paradigm for our response to it are seen in the humanity of Jesus, as he expresses his love for the Father and for us. This description captures many of the essential elements that give flesh and spirit to the celibate commitment.

One might add a fourth element to this description; namely, that chaste celibate love is both a call to and a sign of deep faith and hope in the kingdom.

b. For those who struggle with celibacy, meditation on the humanity of Jesus provides striking encouragement. It reveals that healthy, fruitful celibate living is an existential possibility. Jesus is utterly caught up in the life and work of his Father. At the same time, he loves his brothers and sisters with a warm, outgoing, human love that embraces all. It is he—this celibate—who reveals in his humanity what it means when we say that God is love.¹

The genuineness of Jesus’ relationship with his Father leaps off the pages of the gospels. This is most evident in Luke and John. In Luke, for instance, Jesus turns to the Father again and again in prayer:

3:21 When all the people were baptized, and Jesus was at prayer after likewise being baptized, the skies opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him.
5:16 He often retired to deserted places and prayed.
6:12 Then he went out to the mountain to pray, spending the night in communion with God.
9:18 One day when Jesus was praying in seclusion and his disciples were with him, he put the question to them, “Who do the crowds say that I am?”
9:28 About eight days after saying this he took Peter, John and James, and went up onto a mountain to pray. While he was praying, his face changed in appearance.
10:21 At that moment, Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said: “I offer you praise, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden from the learned and the clever what you have revealed to the merest children.”
11:1 One day he was praying in a certain place. When he had finished, one of his disciples asked him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.”
11:5 He teaches them two parables on prayer.
18:1 He teaches them two further parables on prayer.
22:39 Then he went out and made his way, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; the disciples accompanied him. On reaching the place, he said to them: “Pray that you may not be put to the test.”

¹. On a secular level too, some are so caught up in the pursuit of a value that they renounce even marriage in order to focus their energies, their time, their attention on it. Socrates is the classic example. In more recent times, Albert Schweitzer is often cited.
23:34 Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing."

23:46 Jesus uttered a loud cry and said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." After this he died.

At the same time, in Luke’s gospel, this great man of prayer is also the Evangelizer of the Poor. He is utterly caught up in proclaiming and witnessing to the good news of his Father’s universal love.

Jesus’ style of ministry in Luke is the style of the herald (keryx) of the ancient world. He announces kerygma, good news. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," Jesus tells those in the synagogue at Nazareth, "therefore he has anointed me. To preach good news to the poor he has sent me" (Lk 4:18). He moves from town to town in a mobile ministry (Lk 4:43-44). He warns his followers not to get tied down by material needs: "The foxes have dens, the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Lk 9:58). "Sell what you have and give it to the poor. You will have treasure in heaven. Then come follow me" (Lk 18:22). He tells them to be free, detached, able to go wherever the Father calls them. "If anyone comes to me without turning his back on his father and mother, his wife and his children, his brothers and sisters, indeed his very self, he cannot be my follower" (Lk 14:26) for marriage.

Jesus’ celibate life-style frees him for a mobile ministry. In a sense, his celibacy and his ministry interact with one another. Celibacy liberates him to be radical in showing lack of concern about material possessions, house, homeland, wife, or even the offspring that might carry his own life-blood into the future. Because Jesus as a celibate does not root himself in immediately tangible values, he is freer to pursue single-mindedly those which are intangible. He is able to focus his whole life explicitly on his Father and go wherever the Father sends him to proclaim the good news.

c. Following Jesus, the celibate places his stock in a value that is not seen (or at least is seen “only darkly as in a mirror”), the kingdom of God, and in doing so he renounces a value that is quite visible and deeply appreciated by many, marriage. The celibate renounces the prolongation of his life and his gifts in his children, believing that another form of love, which he has freely chosen, will be prolonged in and fruitful for the kingdom of God.

Seen from this point of view, generous celibate love is always a challenge to the honest observer. Because the observer appreciates the value of marriage.

1. Cf. Mt 19:29; Mk 10:29, where the motivation for renunciation is “for me and for the gospel.”

2. Of course, if celibacy is not lived generously, the honest observer may interpret it as being based not on belief in the power of the kingdom of God, but on any number of other motives (the desire for security, comfortable bachelorhood, etc.).
riage, he knows that a genuine celibate is guided by, and trusts deeply in, an unseen light, believing that the kingdom of God is at hand and that the Lord of the kingdom has the power to give him "a hundred times" as many children in the present and unending life in the world to come (cf. Mk 10:28-30).

In this sense, faithful celibacy is intimately related to that radical evangelical poverty of spirit that places all its future in God.

Stealing a phrase from Basil Hume,\(^1\) we may aptly describe the vowed life, and especially celibacy, as a love that is "reckless but disciplined."

It is reckless, because the love that is the life of the kingdom of God dares great things. It ventures beyond the securities that most people cling to. It looks on material things not as "my own," but as "ours"; it sees them as ways of sharing God's love with our brothers and sisters. It centers on the Lord as the focus of life and is willing to renounce even wife and children to be with the Lord single-mindedly. It seeks not its own desires or its own will in life, but what the Lord asks as he speaks through the community. It throws in its lot with the poor, the abandoned, the outcasts of society. Only through "reckless" love can a person do these things, a love that is free to abandon human securities and leap into the arms of the Lord.

Yet the great paradox is that this love must also be disciplined. Undisciplined love, as Erich Fromm points out,\(^2\) is often mere romance or flirtation. It lacks the qualities that are at the heart of all genuine love: constancy, fidelity, sacrifice. Disciplined love seeks the Lord day after day. It focuses on him, as the psalmist says, in rising up in the morning and in going to bed at night (cf. Ps 92:3). It knows celibacy not only as a joyful, freeing gift, but also as a demanding life-style. It knows poverty not only as generous sharing, but also as personal asceticism. It knows obedience not just as availability to the community and its works, but also as renunciation of a central part of oneself.

e. In that light, let me offer three reflections about this quest for the kingdom of God with a "reckless but disciplined" love.

1) Freely-giving, mature celibate love is not so much an achieved end as a goal to be striven for. A vowed commitment, like all commitments, is not a task accomplished once for all; it is a pilgrimage, a journey.

There will be failures on the journey. Just as we can fail in speech, in justice, in charity, so also we can fail in celibate love. It is a serious mistake to think that sexual sins are the gravest of failings. On the contrary, the Lord seems much more understanding of them than he is of pride and injustice.

There is a wonderful story told by the desert fathers:

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A brother questioned an old man, "If it happens that someone gives way to temptation in consequence of some impulse or other, what may befall him through those who are shocked by it?" He replied, "In an Egyptian monastery there was a famous deacon. Now an official, prosecuted by the judge, came to the monastery with his whole family. Driven by the Evil One, the deacon sinned with the man's wife, and he became a cause of scorn to everyone. So he went to an old man among his friends and made the matter known to him. Now the old man had a sort of crypt behind his cell, and the deacon begged him, 'Bury me there alive, and tell no one.' He went into this dark place and did strict penance. Some time later, the river did not flood, and while everyone was saying litanies, it was revealed to one of the saints that the water would not rise unless a certain deacon who was hidden with a certain monk came. On learning this they were filled with astonishment and went to bring the deacon out from the place where he was. And he prayed, and the water rose, and those who before had been shocked were much more edified at his repentance, and they gave glory to God."

2) Celibacy should be "generative." The mature celibate must keep his creative powers alive and use them in a publicly identifiable way. Erich Erikson puts it rather starkly:

To know that adulthood is generative does not necessarily mean that one must produce children. But it means to know what one does if one does not.2

Since the celibate does not bear children, he must develop an expanded sense of responsibility for life. In this sense, St. Vincent is a wonderful example of celibate love. For him, celibacy does not become an escape from loving; it becomes, rather, a stimulus to love all the more. He promotes life wherever he finds it struggling to survive and grow: in the poor country people, in the clergy called to serve them, in the sick poor, in the foundlings, in the galley slaves, in the Vincentians, in the Daughters of Charity, in the Ladies of Charity, in the wealthy who were searching for a way to use the gifts God had given them. "Love is inventive, even to infinity," he tells the members of his Company.3

Such "generativity" calls for a broadening of one's vision, an expansion

1. This story, found in the collections of the saying of the desert fathers, is among the selections in Thomas Merton, Wisdom of the Desert.
2. E. Erikson, Dimensions of a New Identity 123.
3. SV XI, 146; cf. also SV IX, 139-40, where St. Vincent tells the Daughters: "O my God! O my God! My Daughters, what a consolation! You are virgins and mothers at the same time. Yes, you are mothers of these poor children..."
of interests, moving beyond oneself and one’s present works. It demands a knowledge of one’s own gifts and an eagerness to share them.\(^1\)

The more mature the celibate is, the more will he grow in the ability to be intimate without domination or jealousy. His responses will liberate others rather than bind them to himself. His choices will be determined by care for the good of others rather than by preoccupation about others’ reaction to himself. He will know how to transcend genital sexuality by finding creative ways of being together and working together with others in the service of the kingdom.

3) There are varying ages of celibacy. Each age has its own challenge. When we are young, the challenge is often the physical drive of sex. Later, it is the need for companionship, or intimacy with one other person for whom I am special and who is special to me. Still later, it is the desire for children, for someone to bear my life and my image into the future. And still later, it may be the need for companionship again, for someone whose life I will share and with whom I will find mutual solace in my declining years.

Loneliness enters everyone’s life, whether married or celibate. It signals our incompleteness, our need to reach outside ourselves to find fulfillment. A recent survey in the United States indicates more than ninety percent of the population feel loneliness at one time or another, and that twenty-five percent feel severely or painfully lonely at any given time; only one or two percent seem never to be lonely.\(^2\) It is evident, therefore, that from time to time virtually everyone experiences the need for intimacy as a gnawing desire. The celibate must seek to transform such loneliness into a healthy solitude, where he can find his true self, find God, and find the capacity for creative human relationships.\(^3\)

The challenges are always new. They vary from person to person and from one stage of life to another. In each of the “ages of celibacy” there is the tendency to take refuge in immature compensatory measures, rather than face the challenges of creative love. One could compile a long list of immature refuges: vicarious participation in the sexual experiences of others;\(^4\) absorption with cultivating one’s own physical appearance; denying or demeaning

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1. Along similar lines, cf. the Lenten 1990 letter of the Superior General to the members of the Congregation of the Mission: “Celibacy is about life. . . . To be celibate is to transmit that life which has its source in the loving heart of the celibate Christ. . . . The task that we have taken on through our vow of chaste celibacy, is to give life to others and to give it to them more abundantly. The question, then, that we can pose to ourselves at the end of any day is: To whom have I given life today? Whose life have I enriched by prayer, by work, by action, by understanding, by patience, by compassion?”
4. This is a temptation which is by no means restricted to celibates, as is evidenced by the widespread trade in pornographic literature, films, and video-tapes.
the value of marriage or the pleasure of genital expression; taking refuge in fantasies of sexual gratification and conquest; masturbation; fear of self-disclosure; and protective partnerships.¹

Toward a contemporary practice

As means for living celibacy healthily today, let me suggest six stabilizing factors that, if present in the life of a celibate, will help him to love faithfully, joyfully, and creatively.²

1) Prayer

Karl Rahner puts the matter utterly clearly: “Personal experience of God is the heart of all spirituality.”³

One of the purposes of the vows is to help us focus explicitly on God. They are meant to facilitate our praying. Likewise, our praying will facilitate living out our commitments. As mentioned above, this is very evident in the life-style of Jesus.

In our Vincentian context, as a concrete means, let me suggest the importance of fidelity to the one hour of personal prayer daily demanded by our Constitutions.⁴

2) “Job Satisfaction”

In a survey of thousands of priests and religious more than a decade ago, those who experienced the greatest peace in living their commitment were those who found “job satisfaction,” or joy in their apostolates.⁵ If someone is happy in what he is doing, the burdens of commitment will not be so heavy.

Langdon Gilkey once wrote: “Work and life have a strange reciprocal relationship: only if man works can he live, but only if the work he does seems productive and meaningful can he bear the life that his work makes possible.”⁶

¹. These are related to the “particular friendships” referred to by St. Vincent (CR VIII, 2), but different too, in that the latter usually focus on possession and control, while the former may really be a largely unrecognized conspiracy among persons to maintain their isolation from others.
². Cf. Program #60, for a similar listing.
⁴. Const. 47.
⁵. Readiness for Ministry, published by The Association of Theological Schools in the U.S. and Canada, Vandalia, Ohio, 1975-76.
We cannot “create” happiness; nor is it found by seeking it in itself. It comes in company with other values. In this case, let me suggest that dedicated service to the poor and the clergy can be a source of great joy and satisfaction and can make celibate living much less burdensome.

3) Community and friendship

No man is an island. Besides prayer and work-satisfaction, all of us need human support. “A faithful friend is a secure refuge; whoever has found one has found a treasure,” the Book of Sirach tells us (6:14). St. Vincent was quite aware that the community must attempt to provide an atmosphere in which confreres live as “friends who care for one another deeply,” and where they sense that they can grow. This need is similar, if not greater, today and will continue to be so. Karl Rahner speaks of “fraternal community as a real and essential element of the spirituality of tomorrow.”

Today too we are aware, in a renewed way, that healthy contact with one’s own family and with other friends can be a strengthening, rather than debilitating, force in celibate life. The value of genuine friendship has, of course, perennially been recognized. Cicero sums it up eloquently, reflecting on his relationship with Atticus:

What is more pleasing than to have someone to whom you can express things as openly as to yourself? What savor would success have, if there were not someone to be as happy about it as yourself? Wouldn’t it be harder to bear the blows without someone who feels them more keenly than you do?

4) “Honest Talk”

As a help on the journey, it is important to have the courage to speak confidentially about our sexual struggles and failures with a spiritual director or confessor, as with the Lord. Experience teaches that other wayfarers are ready to accompany us on the celibate journey, are very understanding of our weakness, and know the pitfalls along the road.

Unfortunately, the practice of spiritual direction sometimes falls into disuse after ordination or profession of vows. Yet few things are more
helpful in dealing with intense feelings, concerns, and problems. The struggles we experience in regard to sexuality are often embarrassing, but “honest talk” with a mature director is often the wisest first step in handling them. In the letters quoted in the first part of this article, St. Vincent is very clear about this.1

Conversely, problems too long held within us, or dealt with in isolation, often cause enormous personal confusion and eventually explode. Anyone without a soul friend, the ancient Celtic saying goes, is a body without a head.

5) Personal Discipline and Prudence in Relationships

In my earlier chapter on the five characteristic virtues, I made a number of concrete suggestions in regard to personal discipline.2 Discipline helps in achieving many of the values we commit ourselves to: prayer, work, study, a simple-style, and celibacy too. In fact, few values are achieved without it. In that sense, it is an incarnational reflection of grace, or of the constancy of God’s love.

Though we might be put off by the negativity of what St. Vincent writes concerning the need for caution in relationships with women, there is a perennial wisdom at its core which can be applied in a context where relationships between men and women are seen much more positively: not just any time, or place, or circumstance is appropriate for relationships; this is true not just for celibates, but for married and single people as well. While today we recognize that it is not possible to draw up a precise casuistry in this regard, a celibate must be mature enough to know his own limitations and disciplined enough to live within their bounds. Common sense says, on the one hand, that it is normal to have friends who are women; it says, on the other hand, that our relationship with them should be guided by prudent norms. One of these is that physical expressions of affection, especially when people are alone, often tend in the direction of greater attraction and greater involvement. Surely that is the wisdom in St. Vincent’s concern about a confrere’s being “solus cum sola, loco et tempore indebitis.”3

Discipline in the use of alcohol is also a helpful factor not just in regard to one’s physical health, but also in regard to celibate life. Many who have

1. He writes to Jeanne Lepeintre on February 23, 1650 (SV III, 614): “Spiritual direction is very useful. It is a source of advice when in difficulties, of help when discouraged, of safety when tempted, and of strength when overwhelmed. Finally, it is a source of benefit and consolation when the director is really charitable, prudent and experienced.” St. Vincent often spoke on the need for spiritual direction. Cf. XII, 451-85; XIII, 142.
3. CR IV, 2.
made commitments to celibacy and to marriage testify that sexual problems began or evolved when their inhibitions had been lowered by drinking too much.

6) A Balanced Life-Style

While the Lord calls us to be servants, he wants us to rest too (cf. Ps 127:2; Ex 20:8ff). As a matter of fact, he commands us to rest! He calls us to recognize our limitedness as creatures and to know that not only does he work through us, but that he also works without us.

People who are worn out and discouraged experience problems with celibacy readily. Difficulties that at other times they might more easily handle become insurmountable problems. It is important (not just for celibacy, but for overall health as well) to listen to one’s body, to know when tiredness is sapping one’s strength, to recognize the signs of irritability or anger or poor judgment that signal exhaustion. St. Vincent often warned St. Louise to beware of “indiscreet zeal.”

3. Poverty

Toward a contemporary understanding

a. In the conciliar and post-conciliar Church, perhaps no call has resounded more clearly or more frequently than the call to evangelical poverty. In response to Christ, the Church wants to be the Church of the poor. The same holds true for the Congregation. The Superior General’s Lenten letter of 1989 puts it forcefully: “The Church is the Church of the poor, and the poor are its preferential option. The option for the poor is fundamental to the Congregation; it inspired the birth of the Company and will be the source of its present and future vitality as well. If the Church cannot be conceived of

1. For a very good treatment of this subject, as well as for much practical wisdom in regard to each of the vows, cf. Wilkie Au, By Way of the Heart. Toward a Holistic Spirituality (New York, 1989) 41ff.
3. SV I, 96: “It is a ruse of the devil by which he deceives good souls...” Cf. CR XII, 11; also SV I, 84; II, 140; X, 671.
4. For many of the basic ideas present in contemporary Church documents, cf. PC 13; ET 16-22; PO 17; Canon 600; Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes (February 2, 1990) 14.
without reference to the poor (like the mission of Jesus and the whole gospel message), the same must be said for the Congregation, because the reason for our existence in the Church is to continue the mission of Christ the Evangelizer of the Poor.”

The “Program for Vincentian Formation in the Major Seminary,” following the example of St. Vincent, immediately appeals to the witness of Christ, when it speaks about poverty. It states that we vow:

... poverty, which identifies us with Christ, poor and humble, frees us to share the life of the poor and employ what we are and what we have in their service, regarding them as our portion and our material goods as their patrimony.

b. But though the call to evangelical poverty, both in the Church and in the Congregation, has been clear, many have experienced that finding the concrete ways to respond to that call has been difficult, even sometimes frustrating. Let me suggest that one of the reasons for this difficulty, besides cultural factors and the temptations of the “affluent society,” is the complexity of the concept of “evangelical poverty.” The gospels, the conciliar documents, and our own Constitutions emphasize various facets of poverty. While this is a sign of the concept’s richness, it also makes it difficult to speak about evangelical poverty univocally. Note, for example, the following aspects of poverty, as found in our own Constitutions:

1) Poverty of spirit lies at the core of the gospel. It is the first of the beatitudes and the foundation of New Testament spirituality. It is the attitude of the poor of Israel, of whom Mary is the first. It is the humility that characterizes those who know their complete dependence on God, who long for him, who listen eagerly for his word. It is a recognition of our own creatureliness. It sees all life as gift and turns to God, the giver of all good gifts, with gratitude. It is a detachment that never mistakes the gift for the Giver. It is being free not to have. On the deepest level, it is a renunciation of all forms of wealth, including power and prestige. It is an acknowledgment of our own sinfulness and our need for ongoing conversion and redemption. It is the pre-requisite for being evangelized. In the minister, it is indispensable, if he is really to be evangelized by the poor.

2) Poverty in fact, experience teaches, is closely related to poverty of spirit. To grow in genuine poverty of spirit, the follower of Jesus must develop a special attitude toward material goods, seeing them, in a sense, as

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2. Program, 14c; cf. CR III, 1; C 12, 3°; 31.
3. Cf. C 31; 34; also Mt 5:3.
4. Cf. C 33; 12, 3°; also Lk 9:58.
an extension of his own body. His material goods, like his body, must be ways in which he reaches out to the neighbor. They must be signs of his love. If given away, they will be a way of giving his person and God's love that is within him. If stored up, they will be a way of isolating him from the world and of cutting him off from the kingdom of God. For this reason the wisdom of religious communities has always included recommendations toward simplicity of life, especially as it touches on things like our houses, rooms, clothing, food, travel, and entertainment.

3) **Sharing with the poor** is one of the central New Testament themes. “Sell what you have and give it to the poor,” Jesus says in the synoptic gospels (cf. Mt 19:21; Mk 10:21; Lk 18:22). Even more strikingly, in Matthew’s twenty-fifth chapter he proclaims that the central criterion for judgment is whether or not we have actually shared with the poor when they were hungry, thirsty, homeless, naked, imprisoned (Mt 25:31-46). Genuine solidarity with the poor through extending God’s love to them concretely is the sign of genuine Christian faith and love (cf. Jas 2:14-26; 1 Jn 3:17). Of course, this is very much a part of the Vincentian tradition. The Church and the Congregation today call us to share not only our material goods with the poor, but also to share in some way in their condition, to work within the world of the poor, to confront injustice with them, to labor not just for them but with them, “so that the poor person is an agent, and not simply an object, of evangelization.”

4) **Community of goods** receives great emphasis in the Book of the Acts as Luke paints the picture of the ideal Christian community. The members of the community, like Jesus and the apostles (cf. Jn 13:29), hold all things in common. Luke describes a vibrant, caring community where there is no longer anyone in need, because those who had more sold their goods, so that the needs of others could be satisfied. Reflection on poverty as “community of goods” has concrete ramifications like budgeting and accountability for the use of goods.

5) **The common law of labor** binds members of communities just as it binds the poor. In fact, Jesus repeatedly attempts to instill into his followers, especially the leaders of the community, a servant’s attitude (cf. Jn 13:12-16; Lk 22:25-27; Mt 25-28; Mk 10:42-45; Phil 2:5). Their labor will be one of the signs of their love. In religious communities, such love has often been

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1. Cf. *Evangelica Testificatio* 17, henceforth ET.
4. Cf. C 32; 25, 4°; 148; 149; 154; also Acts 2:42; 4:34.
5. Cf. C 32; also 2 Thes 3:12.
shown through tireless work in schools, hospitals, orphanages, as well as in preaching, visiting the sick, and ministering to the various other needs of the poor.

6) The *evangelical witness* given by those living simply in solidarity with the poor has received great stress in our own documents and in those of the universal Church. In fact, especially at a time when society places so much emphasis on material prosperity, it is striking when someone renounces his possessions in order to serve the poor and remains content with little by way of material goods. This is one of the signs of the kingdom that continues to fascinate the honest observer.

7) *Asking for permission* has traditionally been a part of the vow of poverty, though one might also situate it on the boundary between poverty and obedience. This tradition, found in all religious communities, has two roots: a) the recognition that we form a community of goods, and that consequently we should submit important decisions about the use of those goods to the community itself (through its superiors); b) the recognition that we are sinful and tend always to want more, and that consequently we should submit our own judgment to that of the community when there might be the danger of self-deception.

8) Very much a part of our own tradition has been the tension between absolute poverty and what is needed for the apostolate. This is especially evident today. To labor well for the poor, communities often need cars, computers, sophisticated X-ray or CAT-scan machines, etc. St. Vincent recognized in his day that, as an apostolic community, the Congregation must use contemporary means for serving the poor and training the clergy. But of course, this does create a tension. It demands prudent judgment, capable of distinguishing what will really promote the apostolate goals of the Congregation from what is merely a comfortable luxury.

In analogous fashion, there is also at times a tension between poverty and community needs. Today, for example, giving candidates the education they will need for the future is, in some countries, a very costly matter; but it may be a quite necessary expense. Likewise, providing for the future of the elderly by appropriate health care, or social security, or medical insurance may also be a costly, but indispensable undertaking.

I mention the eight facets of evangelical poverty described above in order to illustrate the complexity as well as the richness of what is involved in our

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1. Cf. C 31; 33; also 2 Cor 8:8.
4. CR IV, 2; cf. C 33; 35; 148; 154.
vowed commitment. The tendency in times of complexity is to seek solutions that are over-simplified; someone might, for example, declare, without nuance, that “poverty of spirit,” or “asking permission,” or “sharing” is what we really have to concentrate on. It is imperative to resist this temptation. Rather, in order to do justice to the gospels, contemporary Church documents and our Constitutions, we must find ways of living out evangelical poverty on a variety of levels. An honest examination of conscience should take into account all of the factors mentioned above.

The matter becomes even more complex when one attempts to address the question of communal poverty, as St. Vincent did, and the proper use of the goods of the Congregation as a whole, of the provinces, or of the local houses for the promotion of justice and charity.

c. Let me suggest that two concepts, much emphasized in contemporary Church documents, may be helpful in sharpening our focus in regard to evangelical poverty: 1) solidarity, and 2) communion.

Many of St. Vincent’s principal concerns in regard to the vow of poverty might be grouped under the concept of solidarity: solidarity with the poor and solidarity with our brothers in the Congregation in the service of the poor. Solidarity with the poor demands that we share with them what we have, that we stand with them in resisting and working to change the unjust social structures that oppress them; that we ourselves experience some of the sting of poverty. “Only one who is poor of heart, who strives to follow the poor Christ, can be the source of an authentic solidarity and a true detachment,” state the recent Directives on Formation. Solidarity with our brothers in community demands that we make decisions together about the use of our community’s resources, and that together as a team, each fulfilling his own task, we observe the common law of labor in the service of the poor.

Communion draws us “to be of one mind and one heart” and “to possess all things in common.” Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, in a statement reminiscent of St. Vincent, points out that its model is the Trinity. Communion is the soul of the Church’s vocation as a sacrament. And like the life of the Trinity, as well as the life that bound together Jesus and the first disciples, it is utterly outgoing. It embraces the most abandoned with a preferential love. In this sense, genuine communion with God is the soul of poverty of spirit, and genuine communion with the poor is the ground for our sharing their want and their pain. The Congregation’s witness in the world depends on both.

2. Ibid. 36-37.
4. Cf. #40.
5. Ibid. 42.
Let me offer, at least as a starting point for concretizing the practice of poverty today, a series of imperatives based on our Vincentian tradition:

1) Be poor in spirit. Recognize your need for God’s word and his saving love. Listen humbly and well to all. Allow yourself to be evangelized by the poor.

2) Learn to see all life as a gift. Share that gift generously with others: your time, your service, your goods. Develop detachment by giving freely.

3) Be poor in fact. Accept some of the privations that poor people experience, especially as regards lodging, food, and material comforts.

4) Eat what is set before you. Do not complain about food. Drink moderately.

5) Develop a simple life-style. Let your room, your clothing, your entertainment be quite modest.

6) Give generously to the poor from your personal belongings; encourage the Company to do likewise from its corporate holdings. Resist the temptation to “capitalize” your money.

7) Often examine conscientiously how you live and work, whether you use the Company’s own goods frequently on yourself or whether you share them generously with others, especially the poor.

8) Hand over your earnings to the community joyfully, without holding back, so that a true community of goods may be established.

9) Ask the required permissions humbly, recognizing in yourself the tendency toward acquisitiveness that lies within all of us. But make your life of poverty more than simply the obtaining of permissions to own things.

10) Be sparing in the things you acquire. Practice a consumer asceticism. Resist pressure from the media to “have to have.”

11) Be willing to labor hard, both in the daily chores of community life and in the labors of the apostolate. Develop a “servant’s attitude.”

I must here add a final brief word on a communal poverty, a topic that demands greater attention than it can be given here. Two of the foremost twentieth-century theologians have made strikingly contrasting statements about communal poverty. Yet different as their statements are, both shed considerable light on the question.

Yves Congar once wrote that communities cannot, and even must not, practice the radical evangelical poverty that individuals are called to. As

mentioned above, they have a responsibility to prepare their young members—a rather expensive task today. They also have an obligation to take good care of their elderly, something that in many countries now involves enormous expense. Surely communities must meet these and other obligations generously and responsibly.

On the other hand, Karl Rahner once wrote that it is impossible to be poor in a rich community.\(^1\) When communities have too much money, they often wind up spending it for their own comfort. What to others might seem a luxury becomes to such communities an affordable necessity. Within such a setting, it is difficult for even the sincerest member to live a life of evangelical poverty.

Conscious of this, a number of house plans and provincial plans today determine that a certain proportion of the community’s income (sometimes ten percent) will be given to the poor.

On a provincial level, even more can be done. Concretely, let me suggest that, within provinces, policies be established for the responsible use of the Congregation’s assets. Reasonable estimates must certainly be made about how much money a province needs for carrying out its works, educating its present and future members, and caring for the sick and elderly. But when those reasonable sums have been set aside and wisely invested, our norms should determine how the rest of our assets can be turned to the best advantage of the poor. One might apply to such monies the famous axiom of St. Ambrose: “You are not making a gift to the poor person. You are handing over to him what is his.”\(^2\)

4. Obedience

*Toward a contemporary understanding*\(^3\)

The problematic

- In some ways obedience is the most difficult of all the vows to write about.\(^4\)

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3. For many of the basic ideas presented in contemporary Church documents, cf. *Perfectae Caritatis* 14 (henceforth PC); ET 23-28; *Presbyterorum Ordinis* 15 (henceforth PO); Canon 601; Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes (February 2, 1990) 15.
4. I must, in order to keep this article within reasonable size-limits, restrict the discussion here to obedience in community life. There is, naturally, much that could also be said (as a
Each of the vows focuses on the following of Jesus and finds its foundation in the gospels. The call to evangelical poverty in the New Testament is strikingly clear, as mentioned above. Likewise it is evident that some are called to a celibate life “for the sake of the kingdom of God.” And finally, the scriptures state unambiguously that Jesus always seeks and does the will of his Father (cf. Jn 4:34; 5:30), and calls his followers to do the same.

But there is a giant step from seeking and doing the will of God to carrying out the will of another human person and regarding that as the will of God.¹ The step would be easier to take, though it would still have to be nuanced carefully, if Jesus had invested religious superiors with special authority and promised to be with them guiding their actions, as he does with the leaders of the Church. But nothing in the New Testament indicates that such is the case with the heads of religious communities. Such institutions receive no special guarantees from the gospels, other than those given to all believers in Jesus. Those who enter communities, moreover, do so by their own free choice. They are also free not to enter. How can they freely bind themselves by vow to obey someone who, like themselves, is quite limited in his insight into God’s will?

b. The problem is further complicated because, among the explanations of obedience offered in the course of history, there have been many distortions. The modern reader may find himself quite uncomfortable, for example, when he hears St. Vincent telling the confreres to obey with “a certain blind obedience.”² While it is clear that St. Vincent himself was aware of the need for using a qualifier (“a certain blind obedience”), still, especially since the experience of Nazism, we are quite aware that the phrase may do more harm than good.

Other distortions are less obvious. Sometimes, for instance, the language used in describing obedience reveals that the paradigm proposed is the parent-child relationship. But this cannot be a sound basis for religious obedience. The parent-child relationship rests on the presumption that the parent is mature and that the child is immature; one would hope that this is not the case in religious life. Moreover, as a child reaches adulthood, his obligation to obedience gives way to other duties based on adult-to-adult standards, but in religious life the obligation to obedience remains throughout life. Even in those cases in religious life where greater maturity on the part

¹ complement to this discussion) about the role of authority in religious life, but that must await another occasion.
² Below, I will offer a brief outline of some of the factors essential for discernment of God’s will in community. The role of superiors is one part (even if an important one), among many others, in this overall process.

CR V, 2.
of the superior is to be presumed, as when a “master” trains a “novice,” the
goal of the process is its own gradual disappearance, with the learner, one
hopes, becoming in his turn a master.

Surely it is also a mistake to employ a paradigm that thinks of superiors
as more learned or more gifted morally or spiritually than those living in the
communities they govern. History teaches the lesson that this is often not the
case. Even if it should be true in a particular case, it is not an adequate basis
for making a vow covering all cases.

Nor, in attempting to explain obedience, can one simply say: “It is good
to give up my will,” or even, “It is good to give up my own will as Jesus did.”
Why is it good? To whom does one give it up? One cannot renounce
responsibility for one’s own actions so easily. We are, after all, morally
responsible for our own acts and must seek always to direct them toward
what is good.¹

It is also a mistake, in explaining obedience, to reduce the authority of
superiors to mere “regulation of traffic” or “maintenance of good order.”
Even if at times the role of the superior has been exaggerated, the tradition
of communities, as well our contemporary documents, sees them as key
figures in the discernment process (or, to use the contemporary term, as
primary animators). Our own recent document on the role of the Visitor, for
example, describes his mission in terms that go far beyond mere traffic
regulation: “The Visitor’s mission is to be in service of the unity of the
province as it seeks and does the will of the Father, who is the salvation of
all in Jesus Christ.”² In other words, he is to be a primary animator in the
province. Our Constitutions speak even more concretely about superiors’
relationship with the community, calling confreres to “try by light of faith to
obey decisions of superiors even when they consider their own views
better.”³

The root question, in light of all this, remains: how do we know that in
doing the will of another we are doing the Father’s will?

The context for obedience⁴

c. In attacking this question, it is important to note from the start that the

33.
6.
3. Const. 37, 2.
4. For an excellent treatment of obedience and discernment, cf. Wilkie Au, By Way of the Heart
over-arching goal of the virtue and vow of obedience—creating an environment in which a community and the individuals within it are eagerly seeking to do the Father’s will—is much more demanding than individual acts of obedience that might be carried out merely by reason of the vow. Johannes Metz writes: “Obedience as an evangelical virtue is the radical and uncalculated surrender of one’s life to God the Father who raises up and liberates.” The acts that concretize the living out of the vow should flow out of this virtue of obedience; at the same time, they should nourish the virtue.

But in the concrete that might not always be the case. In some contexts, superiors and other members of the community, satisfied with their own lights, may actually make meager efforts at listening carefully to others and discerning the will of God. This, unfortunately will distort the process of obedience right from the start.

Sound obedience, in service of the mission, finds its deepest roots within the larger context of a community that is sincerely seeking the will of God. Such a community has a number of readily discernible characteristics:

1. it loves God as a Father and thirsts to do his will;
2. it reads and reflects communally on the word of God;
3. it prays together;
4. its members listen to one another with deep respect;
5. they listen to the directives of Church (e.g., conciliar documents, encyclicals, the law of the Church, etc.) and of their own larger community (e.g., its Constitutions and Statutes, Provincial Norms, etc.);
6. they discern the signs of the times communally, especially the cries of the poor;
7. they engage in ongoing formation, listening to teachers from both inside and outside the community.

Without such characteristics a community is likely to be blind. Its superiors and its other members will be prone to seek their own will, their own goals, their own security, their own comfort, rather than what the Lord is asking. Their decisions, while perhaps juridically correct, will scarcely be an authentic reflection of the gospel.

Bernard Lonergan speaks scathingly of such a situation: “The fruit of unauthenticity is decline. Unauthentic subjects get themselves unauthentic authorities. Unauthentic authorities favor some groups over others. Favoritism breeds suspicion…”

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Given the context described above, contemporary theology seeks to articulate a reasonable basis for the vow of obedience as a function of our commitment to community.

Obedience as a function of community

d. To attempt to clarify the matter, let me suggest a series of propositions.

1. When a person enters a community, he binds himself to a definite way of life within the Church. Such a life involves a mission. It focuses on service of God and his people, and involves prayer, life together, and service in community with others, within the framework of the Church. In joining our own Congregation, we bind ourselves to live in this particular “apostolic society.” We explicitly state that we vow to dedicate our whole lives to the service of the poor in the Congregation of the Mission.

2. All such freely-chosen societies in the Church need, and in fact have always evolved, decision-making processes. The processes vary considerably historically. Sometimes they are monarchical (though always with some limitations), as was the case with many “superior-subject” relationships until fairly recent times. Sometimes they are democratic, as with the General Assemblies of many religious congregations. Today, they are usually a mixture of checks and balances.

3. In committing ourselves to community, we commit ourselves to its decisions. If we really wish to belong to a given community, with its given apostolic ends, approved by the Church as part of her mission, we commit ourselves to live by that community’s decisions. In this sense, looking back over history, obedience was originally included in the “one vow” of joining a religious community; only gradually did it come to be explicitated as a separate vow.

4. It may vary considerably over the course of time how authority is chosen in a given community and how it will reach its decisions.


2. The connection between obedience and mission is emphasized in the recent Directives on Formation, 15: “Whether one has authority in an institute or not, one cannot either command or obey without reference to mission.”

3. Occasionally, some make the error of thinking that obedience is more perfect if the system imposing it is monarchical. This is not necessarily true at all. Obedience, like most Christian values, is not restricted to any particular type of governmental system or cultural context (though the temptation for those living in a particular culture may be to think that it is). Democratic processes can result in decisions that are quite binding and that make difficult
Sometimes today those in authority are appointed (e.g., most bishops today); sometimes they are elected (e.g., the pope, many provincials today, many bishops in the past). Sometimes they reach their decisions monarchicaly, sometimes collegially, sometimes democratically.

5. But in any event, in all historical periods, with their varying cultural contexts, some form of obedience will be necessary if religious communities are to exist. Even in a very democratic structure, obedience is very much a reality (sometimes a stinging one) since those who might favor a minority position must ultimately obey the decision enacted by the majority.

6. Within this context, in which obedience is seen as a function of membership in community, it may be helpful to offer a few reflections on the scope of obedience, a topic often reflected on in foundational writings of communities.

- If they are to be truly binding, all norms and commands must be related to the end and various goals of the particular apostolic society. More traditionally, this has been stated in terms like these: “We owe obedience to superiors . . . according to the Constitutions and Statutes.”¹ In other words, the power of superiors is limited; it does not go beyond the framework set up within the society. This is, in modern times, a touchy area, since the line between one’s “private life” and one’s “community life” is not always an easy one to discern, as our Constitutions acknowledge.²

- All norms and the commands of superiors, to be binding, must also be just. More traditionally, this has been stated in terms like these: “One must obey in all matters where sin is not evident.”³ In other words, the superior’s commands cannot run against the moral law, as interpreted by a well-informed and well-advised conscience. Another way of saying this is that laws or commands must be reasonable. This is evident, since a law is, by definition, a dictate of reason. Consequently, it should be noted that superiors cannot ask foolish things of others just to test their mettle.

¹ Cf. C 38.
² Cf. C 22.
³ Cf. CR V, 2.
But, on the other hand, it should also be noted that in many contexts, as is evident in the “information society” described in Part II, there are often a number of reasonable ways to proceed (not just the one I might think is best) and the superior must eventually choose only one (and perhaps not the one that I might favor), which the community is then called to abide by.

7. Beyond the obligation to obey the commands of superiors, obedience involves a commitment to follow a way of life, as described in a Rule or a Constitution. In fact, since explicit commands are rather rare, the obedience involved in living out the Constitutions and other norms is much more a regular part of life than the obedience involved in responding to the commands of superiors.

Today we would say that such norms demand “substantial observance.” Implied in this is the conviction that if one generously observes the substance of the law (allowing for reasonable exceptions) he will grow in the values the law attempts to foster in individuals (e.g., that they become prayerful apostolic men) and will contribute toward the common good of the community (e.g., that, filled with such men, the community will give vital witness to the good news among the poor).

8. Since obedience is a radical commitment to community and its decision-making processes, a person deepens his “belonging” to community to the extent that he lives out its decisions and he “withdraws from” community to the extent that he fails to abide by them. These decisions are manifested on a variety of levels: Constitutions, Statutes, various ordinances and provincial norms, provincial and local plans, the decisions of various superiors, etc.

Notice that such an understanding of obedience (as an intrinsic element in committing oneself to community) coincides with St. Vincent’s desire to have vows for the sake of the mission. It is because we want to belong to an apostolic, missionary community in the service of the poor that we make a vow of obedience.¹

**Toward a contemporary practice**

The key to obedience, like the key to genuine community, is listening. The word obedience (ob thoroughly + audire to hear) itself makes this clear. How central this is not only to the vow of obedience, but to all New Testament

¹ Cf. “The Visitors in Service of the Mission,” *Vincentiana* XXXIV (1990), 43, para. 19: “Everything said in Rio about the Visitor’s role as animator has our mission as a final reference point, but our mission as carried out in a communal way.”
spirituality is one of the main themes of Luke’s gospel. It is impossible to treat this theme at length here because of limitations of space, but the reader may wish to meditate on the many passages in which Luke reiterates the importance of listening: e.g., 8:19-21; 10:38-42; 11:27-28; cf. also 1:26f.; 1:39f.; 2:16f.; 2:36f.; 2:41f.). One of the great challenges in community today is the designing of processes in which listening is highlighted. A community will do the will of God only to the extent that its members, and particularly its leaders, can really hear what God is saying.

Because of this, it is evident, especially today, that obedience is binding not just on “subjects,” but also on “superiors.” The demands on both are great. Together, both are called to seek the will of God. In order to do this, both must listen well.¹

Today we place great emphasis on the need to listen in community. As Bernard Lonergan often pointed out: “Community means people with a common field of experience, with a common or at least complementary way of understanding people and things, with common judgments and common aims. Without a common field of experience people are out of touch. Without a common way of understanding, they will misunderstand one another, grow suspicious, distrustful, hostile, violent. Without common judgments they will live in different worlds, and without common aims they will work at cross-purposes.”² Our Constitutions and Statutes, recognizing the importance of the input of all the confreres in decisions affecting their lives, sometimes use the phrase “the superior with the community” to describe the process for arriving at decisions.³ They also demand frequent meetings of all the confreres of the houses, who will act like a council for superiors.⁴ To the extent that confreres participate actively in the meetings, consultations, and dialogue that are part of our present-day structures, they will be subjects of decision-making and obedience rather than merely its objects.

The law, now as in the past, allows the superior, except in a relatively small number of cases, to act contrary to the advice of his councillors. In allowing this freedom, the law reflects the conviction that truth does not always reside with the majority. Religious obedience is not merely vote-counting; it involves dialogue and listening on the part of all. But, while it is clearly legal for a superior to go against the advice of his council, it is also

¹. ET 25, puts it this way: “Far from being in opposition to one another, authority and individual liberty go together in the fulfillment of God’s will, which is sought fraternally through a trustful dialogue between the superior and his brother, in the case of a personal situation, or through a general agreement regarding what concerns the whole community.”
². Ibid., 5-6.
³. Cf. C 129, 2; S 78, 4°.
⁴. S 79, 3.
clear, from a moral point of view, that a superior who frequently does so runs
the risk of grave imprudence.¹

Given this background, it is evident that obedience today is a much
broader and much more demanding concept than simply obeying the com-
mands of superiors. Within this framework, let me outline some contem-
porary means for practicing obedience as we vow it today. Our Constitutions
and Statutes and other present-day sources tell us that, for a Vincentian,
contemporary obedience involves:

1. entering into open and responsible dialogue²
2. listening carefully to the opinions of others, to data about the
   signs of the times, to the call of the gospels, to directives and
   lines of action of the Congregation³
3. taking active part in consultations⁴
4. assisting at and contributing to meetings⁵
5. contributing actively to the formulation of the local community
   plan, and faithfully carrying it out⁶
6. taking initiative⁷
7. obeying decisions of superiors in the light of faith even though
   we may think our own opinion better⁸
8. striving to achieve unity in mind, heart and action⁹
9. being concretely available to go to any part of the world¹⁰

Let me conclude these reflections on the four Vincentian vows by renew-
ing my appeal for reactions and further efforts toward concretization on the
part of others. I trust that through dialogue we can deepen our understanding
of and commitment to the vowed life. In doing so, we will better accomplish
the missionary goals given us by St. Vincent.

The vows play an extremely important role in the life of the Congregation,
not just as history but as prophecy. If fully lived out, they make the gospel
come alive. They witness to the presence of the kingdom of God, “already”

² C 24, 2; 37; 46, 97.
³ C 2.
⁴ C 96; cf. S 68, 69, and many other places where confreres are asked to respond to
   consultation. Cf. also C 134, on the house council.
⁵ C 96; 97; 136; S 79, 3.
⁶ C 27; S 16.
⁷ Cf. C 129, which states that the Congregation “forms itself in the local communities” and
   that the superior “with the community” promotes the ministries of the house and is concerned
   for the growth and activities of each.
⁸ C 37, 2.
⁹ C 24.
¹⁰ C 12, 5.
in our midst but "not yet" here in its fullness. In a changing world, a changing Church, and a changing Congregation, they have a vital function. As he envisions the Church of the future, Karl Rahner writes:

*The spirituality of the future will be a spirituality of the Sermon on the Mount and of the evangelical counsels, continually involved in renewing its protest against the idols of wealth, pleasure and power.*