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## Instruction on Stability, Chastity, Poverty, and Obedience in the Congregation of the Mission

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**INSTRUCTION**

**on**

**STABILITY, CHASTITY,**

**POVERTY, and OBEDIENCE**

**in the**

**CONGREGATION of the MISSION**

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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

C - Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission

CJC - Code of Canon Law

CR - Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission

PC - Perfectae Caritatis

S - Statutes of the Congregation of the Mission

SV - followed by a Roman numeral and an Arabic numeral refers to the fourteen volume French edition of St. Vincent's works, edited by Pierre Coste (Paris: Gabalda, 1920-25).

January 25, 1996

*To the members of the Congregation of the Mission*

My very dear confreres,

May the grace of Our Lord be always with you!

Today I place in your hands the new *Instruction on Stability, Chastity, Poverty, and Obedience in the Congregation of the Mission*. As I do so, I find myself reflecting on the words that St. Vincent addressed to the members of the Congregation just a year before his death:

*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. (SV XII, 301)*

This instruction is, of course, just an instrument. It will be effective only if we use it as a tool for genuine personal renewal. The vows, as you know, involve not just a single commitment made after a period of initial formation; rather, they call us to ever-deepening fidelity, to ongoing renewal, to placing ourselves more and more in the hands of the Lord as evangelizers and servants of the poor.

As you may recall, the 38th General Assembly of the Congregation (1992) decreed that the Superior General should prepare this instruction. I am very grateful to those who helped in the process: Frs. José Ignacio Fernández de Mendoza, John Prager, Jaime Corera, Léon Lauwerier, Hugh O'Donnell, Miguel Pérez Flores, and Benjamín Romo. Likewise, I want to thank the Visitors and their councils, as well as the members of the General Council, all of whom offered suggestions that contributed significantly to the writing of the final document.

You will notice that the instruction treats the vow of stability first. The decree of the General Assembly asked that special attention be given to this vow since permanent commitment is a formidable challenge in contemporary society. St. Vincent too recognized the difficulty of life-long fidelity and for precisely that reason he proposed this vow to the members of the Company. He reminded them: "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" (SV III, 392).

Let me say a few words about the use of this document.

1. During its composition, all of us who were involved in preparing the instruction became aware of how difficult it is to take into account all of the cultural differences that exist within the worldwide Congregation. You will note in the instruction that we allude from time to time to the variety of cultures. But, as I trust all readers will understand, it proved impossible to treat these differences explicitly in all their concreteness. That is a task that we must leave to the provinces, in their own cultural settings. I want to encourage particularly those who are responsible for formation, both initial and ongoing, to use this document as a means for further inculturation of our Vincentian tradition, vows, and spirituality within your own local circumstances.

2. I am eager that this document be *used*, not placed on a shelf where it will soon be forgotten. It has been written in obedience to a mandate of the General Assembly, the highest authority in the Congregation. In that light, I ask the Visitors:

- a. to provide a copy of this instruction for each confrere;
- b. to provide for its use as a basis for reflection during the annual retreats of the confreres in the calendar year 1997;
- c. to provide for its use also as the basis for ongoing formation sessions within the provinces during the calendar year 1997;
- d. to provide for its use in the internal seminary and in the theologates of the Congregation as a means of assisting our own seminarians in preparing for vows.

3. I ask each reader to allow himself to enter into the spirit of this document. Surely, not everything which could have been said has been said. Let your own background and experience in living the vows enter into open and creative dialogue with this current expression of their meaning. In this way, I hope that each of us can be like the head of a household who keeps both the new and old in his storeroom (Mt. 13:52).

It will take humility to sit down and allow this document to be an "instruction." There is a tendency (I often see it in myself!) to think that we "already know all that stuff." For that reason, I encourage you, like Mary, the Mother of Jesus, to be a humble listener. In Luke's gospel, she hears what God is saying through words and events and she then puts it into practice steadfastly. She knows how to turn things over in her heart, to meditate on them, and to treasure God's invitations. I hope that all of us can do likewise with the help of this instruction and, as a consequence,

deepen our life-commitment to follow Christ the Evangelizer of the Poor in chastity, poverty, and obedience.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.  
Superior General



## CHAPTER I

### JESUS CHRIST, THE RULE OF THE MISSION

*"The purpose of the Congregation of the Mission is to follow Christ, the Evangelizer of the Poor." (C 1)*

Jesus Christ is the center of our life and of all our activity (C 5). Although this is true for every Christian, the ways of following Jesus vary according to the gifts men and women receive and their different vocations. In the Congregation of the Mission we freely commit ourselves to follow Jesus as St. Vincent did, striving to incarnate his missionary charism as evangelizers of the poor.

#### **1. ST. VINCENT DE PAUL: THE DISCOVERY OF CHRIST IN THE POOR AND THE POOR IN CHRIST**

For St. Vincent de Paul, Jesus Christ is above all the Savior, the Son of the Father, sent to evangelize the poor. The saint constantly reflected on the Gospel texts: "The Spirit of the Lord ... has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor" (Lk 4:18) and "As often as you did it for one of my least brothers and sisters, you did it for me" (Mt 25:40). With deep compassion our founder allowed himself to be challenged by the suffering and misery of the poor and discerned in their needs a call to embody the Gospel.

St. Vincent's relationship with many of the spiritual masters of his time drew him to focus his thoughts on the incarnation. He admired the immense love of God poured out for humanity in the life, death and resurrection of the Son. The kenosis of Jesus, who took on the human condition to free us from slavery to sin, profoundly affected the direction of his life.

Opening his eyes to the world of the poor, the saint discovered spiritual and material needs all around him. He also discovered Jesus Christ, who acted in his life and in the lives of the poor. Little by little he became conscious of his own vocation and, subsequently, that of the missionaries: "In this vocation we live in conformity with the Lord, whose principal goal for entering the world was to assist the poor and care for them: *Misit me evangelizare pauperibus*" (SV XI, 108).

The poor challenged St. Vincent to revitalize his faith and to discover Christ in their midst. He "turned the medal" (SV XI, 32) and encountered Jesus, the missionary

of the Father, calling him to participate in the mission to the poor. This vision, both faith-filled and realistic, also permitted the saint to see the poor from Christ's perspective. He entered their world with great respect for them as persons and with loving compassion for their sufferings. This vision of Christ in the poor and the poor in Christ was the evangelical spirit that he shared with others who came to join him in the mission (SV XI, 40, 392).

## **2. JESUS CHRIST IS THE RULE OF THE MISSION (SV XII, 130)**

As sons of St. Vincent our lives must resonate with the spirit of Jesus, present in the mystery of the poor, which our founder shared with us. We are called to open our hearts and make the Lord's attitudes our own (C 6). As St. Vincent reminded us: "The design of the Company is to imitate Our Lord .... We must strive to conform our thoughts, works and intentions to his ... to be men of virtue, not only interiorly, but by acting virtuously" (SV XII, 75).

Struggling to make Christ's spirit our own, we hope to be able to say with St. Paul: "The life I live now is not my own; Christ is living in me" (Gal 2:20). If we are to participate in the mission of Jesus, the evangelizer of the poor, he must be the Rule of the Mission. Vincent told the first missionaries: "What an important enterprise it is to put on the spirit of Christ." He went on to explain that the spirit of Christ is "the Holy Spirit poured out in the hearts of the just and which dwells in them and creates the dispositions and inclinations which Christ had on earth" (SV XII, 107-108). The Common Rules present the task of putting on the spirit of Jesus as a missionary's first duty and our present Constitutions reiterate the theme, calling Vincentians individually and collectively to "*make every effort to put on the spirit of Christ himself in order to acquire a holiness appropriate to their vocation*" (C 1,1\_; CR I, 3).

In the spirit of Christ, evangelizer of the poor, missionaries should be filled with: "*love and reverence for the Father, compassionate and efficacious love for the poor and docility to Divine Providence*" (C 6).

### **A. LOVE AND REVERENCE FOR THE FATHER**

Jesus Christ entered the world to make known the Father's love. He is the adorer of the Father, the Son who makes the Kingdom of God the center of His life. Sent by the Father, he lives in intimate union with him through prayer. In all things he places a priority on seeking to do the Father's will. "He did not want to say that his doctrine was his own, rather he referred it to the Father .... O my Savior, what love you had for your Father! Could he have had a greater love, my brothers, than to pour out himself for the Father? ... than to die for love in the way that he died? ... I always do the will of my Father; I always perform the actions and works that are pleasing to him" (SV XII, 108-109).

In calling us to follow him, Jesus challenges us to make our own the two-fold thrust of his life as St. Vincent described it: "religion towards the Father and charity towards humanity" (SV VI, 393). This is a summons to enter into the mystery of a life centered on the Father's love. Jesus encourages us to seek first the kingdom of God and its justice (Mt 6:33), to honor God with our whole lives, loving him with all our heart and soul and mind (Mt 22:37).

## B. *COMPASSION AND PRACTICAL LOVE FOR THE POOR*

As he dedicated his life more and more to the evangelization of the poor, St. Vincent opened his heart in charity. His whole being became permeated with the compassionate love of Christ and he identified himself with that love. Love of God was not enough. It had to be united to love of neighbor (SV XII, 261).

Recognizing in the poor his suffering brothers and sisters, Vincent looked for practical ways to make his love effective. "We cannot see our neighbor suffer without suffering with him ... " (SV XII, 270). In this St. Vincent echoes the letter of John: "One who has no love for the brother or sister he has seen cannot love the God he has not seen" (I Jn 4:20b). The spirit of Christ is the spirit of charity, God's love expressed in action.

*"The love of Christ, who had pity on the crowd, is the source of all our apostolic activity, and urges us, ... to make the gospel effective"* (C 11; SV XII, 84). Faithful to St. Vincent, the Congregation tries to make its own the compassionate love of Christ for the poor.

## C. *DOCILITY TO DIVINE PROVIDENCE*

Jesus lived his life in conformity with the will of his Father. He preached the coming of the Kingdom, which was the expression of God's salvific will. Trusting in the Father's love, he remained faithful even to death on the cross. "Father, into your hands, I commend my spirit," was the prayer that put into words his final act of trust in providence (Lk 23:46). His faithfulness was not in vain, because the Father raised him up.

St. Vincent de Paul experienced God's presence as liberation. In the most difficult situations he trusted in the love of God, which makes itself known in providential action. "The good which God desires is accomplished almost by itself, without our even thinking of it. That is how our Congregation came into being, how the missions and retreats for the ordinands began, .... That is ... how all the works for which we are now responsible came into existence" (SV IV, 122-123).

In the spirit of Jesus, Vincent developed a deep trust in Providence and spoke often of placing ourselves into the Father's hands. We have to abandon ourselves to Providence and "it will know quite well how to procure what we need" (SV I, 356).

Trust in God's Providence produces fidelity to God's will, even when this is demanding or leads to the cross. "We cannot better assure our eternal happiness than by living and dying in the service of the poor, in the arms of Providence, and with genuine renouncement of ourselves in order to follow Jesus Christ" (SV III, 392).

### **3. FIDELITY TO ST. VINCENT**

#### **A. *FROM ST. VINCENT'S INITIAL INSPIRATION TO THE FOUNDATION OF THE CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION***

The first members of the Congregation of the Mission were attracted to the vision of the gospel which the saint shared with them. They joined St. Vincent in following Jesus, the evangelizer of the poor. Like the founder, they responded to the call to give their whole lives to the service of the needy. Together they sought ways to make the gospel effective in the midst of the sufferings of the most abandoned.

The initial inspiration of St. Vincent and his first followers continues to challenge the Congregation of the Mission more than three centuries later. Jesus, the evangelizer of the poor, still calls us to follow him as he walks among the abandoned and the marginalized. The response of the Congregation of the Mission, rooted in the radical commitment of each member to follow Jesus as a disciple, is a communal action. In the time of St. Vincent, the most pressing needs of the poor, the apostolic mission, community life, the call to be disciples of Jesus, and the testimony of Vincent himself created a dynamism which gave the nascent Congregation of the Mission its own particular identity. Faithful to that tradition, the Congregation struggles to follow the movement of the Spirit in the events and situations of our time. The same dynamism, shaped by similar factors, challenges us to embody the Vincentian charism in a new context and respond to the pressing needs of the poor in new ways.

#### **B. *THE ORIGINALITY AND THE DISTINCTIVE CHARACTER OF THE CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION***

Fidelity today to the initial inspiration of St. Vincent depends on an adequate knowledge of the Congregation's particular character. Monsieur Vincent's community was in his time a new invention, created, not on pre-existing canonical schemes, but rather, as a response to events. St. Vincent himself, who knew full well that other missionary communities existed, was very conscious of the novelty of the Congregation of the Mission. He reminded the first missionaries that God had waited sixteen hundred years to create a community that did what Jesus did, going from village to village preaching the Good News to the poor. "There is no other Company in God's Church," he declared, "which has the poor for its inheritance" (SV XII, 79-80).

Our founder felt the need from the beginning to respond with agility and creativity to the demands of the apostolate with the poor. For that reason he deliberately looked for a way to free himself from the structures of traditional religious life. He founded an apostolic community of secular character, which he described as living in "a state of charity" (SV XI 43-44; XII, 275).

Vatican II recommended that "the spirit and aims of each founder should be faithfully accepted and retained, as indeed should each institute's sound traditions, for all of these constitute the patrimony of an institute" (PC, 2). St. Vincent's original insight has been recognized and sanctioned by the present Code of Canon Law. A new section, **Societies of Apostolic Life**, defines the specific character of communities like the Congregation of the Mission (Canon 731 § 1). **The centrality of the apostolate pursued in community** is the principal characteristic of institutes like ours. A clear awareness of our juridical status will help us revive the creativity and flexibility for mission which marked the life and work of St. Vincent.

### C. *THE FIVE CHARACTERISTIC VIRTUES*

The Congregation of the Mission professes always to live and work in conformity with the sayings of the gospel (CR II), which define the fundamental aspects of Jesus' spirit. For that reason it is called to acquire Jesus' virtues, in particular five characteristic virtues, which are like "the faculties of the soul of the whole Congregation" (CR II, 14). These virtues, which have a missionary character, are the source of the attitudes that Jesus had toward the Father and toward the poor. Not only do they lead to the personal perfection of the missionary, they also help him to become a true evangelizer of the poor:

- **Simplicity** leads to purity of intention and to truthfulness in our words and works; it enables the missionary to be transparent before God and the poor.

- **Humility** makes the missionary one who depends on God and is open to his grace; it enables him to be with the poor and to live in solidarity with the lowly, capable of being evangelized by them.

- **Meekness** creates interior peace in the missionary; it enables him to be gentle and patient with others, especially the poor.

- **Mortification** unites the missionary to the suffering Christ and frees him from self-seeking; it makes him available to the poor despite the difficulties and obstacles in the mission.

- **Evangelical Zeal** generates energy for promoting the Kingdom of God; it awakens affective and effective enthusiasm for the evangelization of the poor.

St. Vincent recognized that there is a dynamic mutual relationship between our apostolic activity and living out the five characteristic virtues of the missionary. For this reason he insisted that true religion is found among the poor (SV XI, 200-201; XII, 170-171); that they are our Lords and masters (SV X, 266, 332; XI, 393; XII, 5), and that they evangelize us (SV XI, 200-201). The Constitutions suggest: "*some sharing in the condition of the poor, so that not only will we attend to their evangelization but that we ourselves may be evangelized by them*" (C 12, 3\_).

#### D. *THE EVANGELICAL COUNSELS*

The missionary, like every Christian, is called to holiness. In baptism he becomes a child of God and is introduced into the life of the Trinity; that is, he is called to enter into an intimate relationship with the Father, the Son and the Spirit. The missionary's road to holiness includes, as has often been emphasized in the tradition of the Church, the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience lived in the service of the poor. As Pope John Paul II has said: "The call to the way of the evangelical counsels always has its beginning in God: 'You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide' (Jn 15:16). The vocation in which a person discovers in depth the evangelical law of giving, a law inscribed in human nature, is itself a gift! It is a gift overflowing with the deepest content of the Gospel ..." (*Redemptionis donum*, 6).

For St. Vincent, the practice of poverty, chastity and obedience has a clear missionary sense: "The little Congregation of the Mission came into existence in the Church to work for the salvation of people, especially the rural poor. That is why it has judged that no weapons would be more powerful or more suitable than those which Eternal Wisdom so tellingly and effectively used. Every confrere, therefore, should keep to such poverty, chastity and obedience faithfully and persistently as understood in our Congregation" (CR II, 18).

The missionary's road to love and holiness is not one of superiority, of seeking social position, riches, or personal pleasure. It is the spirit of the beatitudes and the evangelical counsels, the spirit of the poor, which paradoxically leads to true life and happiness. This is the spirit found at the center of our fidelity to serving the poor in chastity, poverty, and obedience. In this spirit the Congregation of the Mission finds the strength and the energy to undertake its mission.

#### E. *THE PROPHETIC CHARACTER OF THE EVANGELICAL COUNSELS*

We know that today the evangelical counsels seem like foolishness to many. But we place our confidence in the fact that they manifest God's "foolishness" (I Cor 1:26-28), and we believe that, paradoxically, they embody the wisdom and power of God. When we move beyond a purely logical, rationalistic analysis of the evangelical

counsels, it is possible to grasp that a life lived according to these counsels has a special role in the salvation and the liberation of humanity.

The human family hungers for the gift of fidelity, now that social structures and customs have lost the power to insure it. We hope that our vow of stability, which is a promise of fidelity to the evangelization of the poor, can be a response to the yearning for fidelity in the hearts of men and women today. We hope that it can be a sign of the dynamic commitment we wish to share with them, recognizing our own weakness and doubts as we struggle to persevere. We hope that it can be a sign of the power and energy which spring forth from the Holy Spirit, sustaining source of the evangelical counsels, who binds us to God and our brothers and sisters as a support in our weakness.

We, who share with all humanity the deep desire for true love, should be ready to help others experience the love of God and the fraternal love which we experience in a life of celibate chastity lived for others. Our celibacy should express a commitment to share our lives with our brothers and sisters, even though we recognize that we often receive more than we give, especially from those who have been faithful to marriage and family.

Since we live in a world that produces enough for everyone, could we not satisfy the needs of all if we tempered our desire to possess and consume? We hope that our experience of poverty, confirmed by our vow, can say something to the world about dependence on God, the joy of sharing, solidarity with the poor and the structural changes that would resolve many of the problems of our contemporary world.

Finally, we discover in our experience of obedience that we can listen to God's voice, not only in the directives of our superiors, but in the events of the world, in dialogue, and in discernment. We hope that our obedience can say something to the world about listening to each other, dialogue, respecting differences of opinion and culture, and the need to work together in cooperation.

#### F. *THE FREEDOM AND JOY OF THE EVANGELICAL COUNSELS*

The practice of the evangelical counsels and a life of charity demand discipline and sacrifices, participation in the Lord's cross and the suffering of the poor. But the fruit of entering into the Paschal Mystery is the grace of the freedom of the children of God and evangelical joy (Rm 6:20-23).

Fidelity to and perseverance in this form of following Jesus free us gradually from attachment to places, ministries, material possessions and personal selfishness. It makes us capable of viewing all good things as God's gifts and of living in gratitude for what we have received. It liberates us, so that we recognize the generous hand of God in all that happens, seeing his love in every person; thus it enables us to love in a

new way. If we truly give ourselves over to the life of the evangelical counsels, we will find it possible to use things in light of their relation to the Kingdom of God. We will be free to move wherever the demands of the mission indicate and the Spirit calls.

This evangelical freedom carries with it a profound joy: the happiness of sharing life with the poor and the gladness of serving the people God places in our path; joy in learning to share in a new way, from our poverty and not our richness. More than anything, it produces the happiness that comes from walking with the Spirit and experiencing the graces which the Spirit brings: charity, joy, peace, patient perseverance, generosity, gentleness and mortification (Gal 5:22 ff).

#### G. *THE EVANGELICAL COUNSELS AND THE VINCENTIAN VOCATION*

All these considerations make us ask ourselves: are we in fact united, through the evangelical counsels, to the deepest yearnings of humanity and the poor? Do we really, through the evangelical counsels, live a life committed to following Jesus in service, fully given over to God?

All the members of the Congregation of the Mission are "given to God" for the evangelization of the poor. Our self-gift as Vincentians is possible only in the full, radical living of the evangelical counsels. *"Wishing to follow the mission of Christ, we commit ourselves as members of the Congregation to evangelize the poor for the whole of our lives. To fulfill this vocation we embrace chastity, poverty and obedience according to the Constitutions and Statutes"* (C 28). The key to our vocation is the giving of ourselves for the evangelization of the poor, continuing the mission of Christ who was poor, chaste and obedient. This self-gift receives its confirmation and ratification in the vows of the Congregation of the Mission.



## JESUS CHRIST, THE RULE OF THE MISSION

### *- Some Texts That May Serve for Meditation -*

1. "So, let us move on now to the second paragraph where the rule says, quoting Jesus Christ: 'Seek first the kingdom of God and his justice, and all these things which you need will be given to you as well' (Mt 6:33). Our Lord, then, has recommended this to us, so we should make it our own; he wants it; he is the rule of the Mission." (SV XII, 130)

2. "Let each of us accept the truth of the following statement and try to make it our most fundamental principle: Christ's teaching will never let us down, while worldly wisdom always will. Christ himself said this sort of wisdom was like a house with nothing but sand as its foundation, while his own was like a building with solid rock as its foundation. And that is why the Congregation should always try to follow the teaching of Christ himself and never that of the worldly-wise. To be sure of doing this we should pay particular attention to what follows." (CR II, 1)

3. "We should make it a sacred principle,... that since we are working for God we will always use God-related ways of carrying out our work, and see and judge things from Christ's point of view and not from a worldly-wise one; and not according to the feeble reasoning of our own mind either." (CR II, 5)

4. "We should follow, as far as possible, all the gospel teaching already mentioned, since it is so holy and very practical. But some of it, in fact, has more application to us, particularly when it emphasizes simplicity, humility, gentleness, mortification, and zeal for souls. The Congregation should pay special attention to developing and living up to these five virtues so that they may be, as it were, the faculties of the soul of the whole Congregation, and that everything each one of us does may always be inspired by them." (CR II, 14)

5. "Remember, Father, we live in Jesus Christ through the death of Jesus Christ, and we must die in Jesus Christ through the life of Jesus Christ, and our life must be hidden in Jesus Christ and filled with Jesus Christ, and in order to die as Jesus Christ, we must live as Jesus Christ." (SV I, 295)

6. "Our Lord Jesus Christ is the true example and that great invisible portrait on which we are to model all our actions; and the most perfect men at present alive on earth are the visible and perceptible portraits which serve as models for us in properly regulating all our actions and making them pleasing to God." (SV XI, 212-213)

7. "Another point to which you should pay close attention is to depend heavily on the guidance of the Son of God. I mean that, when you have to act you should make this reflection: 'Is this in conformity with the maxims of the Son of God?' If it is, then say: 'Fine, let's do it;' if not, say: 'I will have nothing to do with it.'

In addition, when there is question of doing a good work, say to the Son of God: `Lord, what would you do if you were in my place? How would you instruct these people? How would you console this person who is mentally ill?'" (SV XI, 347-348)

8. "The Congregation's idea is to imitate our Lord, in so far as poor weak people can. What does this mean? It means that the Congregation takes as its aim to model itself on the way he behaved, on what he did, on his work and on his own aims. How could a person stand in for someone else if he had not the same characteristics, features, proportions, style and looks? It could not be done. So, if we aim at making ourselves like this divine model, with this desire, this blessed longing, in our hearts, we must try to make our thoughts, actions and intentions the same as his. He is not just *Deus virtutum*; he came to put all virtues into practice, and since what he did and did not do are virtues, we have to model ourselves on these, trying to be men of virtue. And not merely in our intentions either; we have to carry these out in the way we behave, so that what we do or do not do stems from this principle." (SV XII, 75)

9. "The rule tells us that, to do this, as well as to tend to our own perfection, we must put on the Spirit of Jesus Christ. What a huge project \_ to put on the Spirit of Jesus Christ! This means that, in order to be perfect, to be effective in helping people, to serve the clergy well, we have to strive to imitate the perfection of Jesus Christ and try to attain it. It also means that we can do nothing by ourselves. We must be filled and animated with this Spirit of Jesus Christ. To understand this clearly, it is essential to know that his Spirit is given to all Christians who live according to the rules of Christianity; their actions and works are imbued with the Spirit of God. As you see so well, God has raised up the Company to act in the same way. We have always loved the maxims of Christ and we want to put on the spirit of the Gospel. This is so that we may live and act as Our Lord did, so that his Spirit may be apparent in the whole Company and in each missionary, in all its works in general and in each one in particular." (SV XII, 107-108)

10. "That is a description of our Lord's spirit, something which we must take on; and it means, in one word, always being in awe of God and loving him greatly. He was so imbued with this that he never acted on his own or for self-satisfaction: *Quae placita sunt ei facio semper*; I always do my Father's will; I always undertake activities and work which please him. Now, since it was the Father's will that the eternal Son was not enticed by the world, by possessions, pleasures and honors, we share his spirit when we have the same attitude." (SV XII, 109)

11. "We must, then, hold it as basic that Jesus Christ's teaching achieves what it says, while that of the world never delivers what it promises; that people who follow Jesus Christ's teaching are building on rock which neither flood waters nor storm winds can shake; and that people who do not do what he commands are like someone who built his house on quicksand and it was flattened in the first storm. Anyone, then, who speaks of Jesus Christ's teaching is speaking about an immovable rock, he is

speaking about eternal truths which infallibly produce their effects, so that the heavens themselves would fall before Jesus Christ's teaching would prove false. That is why the rule concludes that the Company make profession of taking on the teaching of Jesus Christ and putting it into practice, and never that of the world. In acting in this way it will be filling itself and clothing itself with Jesus Christ." (SV XII, 115-116)

12. "Oh, if God gives us the grace to take on this practice, never to make a judgement according to human thinking because it never reaches the truth, never reaches God, never reaches divine reasons, never; if, I say, we regard our mere reasoning as deceitful and act according to the gospel, let us be thankful to our Lord, and try to form judgements like he did, try to do what he recommended by word and example. And not only that, but let us try to penetrate his spirit so that we can participate in his activity. It is not enough just to do good \_ we must do it well, following our Lord's example. The gospel says about him that everything he did he did well: *Bene omnia fecit* (Mk 7:37). Fasting, keeping the rules, working for God, is not everything; these things must be done in his spirit, in other words perfectly, with his aims and in the way that he did them." (SV XII, 178-179)

## CHAPTER II

### STABILITY: FIDELITY IN EVANGELIZING THE POOR

*"We have all brought to the Company the resolution to live and die in it. We have brought it all that we are, body, soul, will, capacity, industry and the rest. Why? To do what Jesus Christ did, to save the world." (SV XII, 98)*

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the midst of all the changes that occurred in St. Vincent's thoughts on the vows before 1641, one element invariably appears: the need to have a specific vow to insure a lifetime commitment to the evangelization of the poor, which would also mean "living and dying in the (Congregation of the) Mission" (SV II, 137). There was even a moment when he thought that the only vow necessary for strengthening the Mission would be the vow of stability (Vincent himself gives it this name; cf. SV II, 28). In effect, the vow of stability would guarantee in the lives of the missionaries two essential elements of the Mission as an institution: (1) a lifetime permanency in the Congregation and (2) a consecration of one's entire life to the evangelization of the poor.

#### 2. THE PRESENT SITUATION

The modern world has been marked by the yearnings of millions to be free from social and political domination. The young nations struggle to move beyond the economic and cultural oppression of the colonial past.

On every continent, groups and individuals have sprung up which promote solidarity with the poor, the struggle for a more just society and the defense of human rights. The Church has lent its support to these efforts through its social teaching. It has committed resources and personnel to a preferential option for the poor.

Nonetheless, while some sectors of society have become more conscious of the plight of the poor, the breach between rich and poor grows. The consumer mentality of having more and using more has become an acceptable lifestyle for many. Many modern economic structures produce more poverty. The media often depict those who are of little use to the economy - the poor, the old, the sick - as failures, responsible for their own suffering. In this situation, standing with the

marginalized or making a vow of service to the poor requires "counter-cultural" courage.

There are other difficulties, of a different nature, which arise from trends in our changing society. The rapidity of change and the tendency to favor short-term solutions and rewards, which characterize the last decades of the twentieth century, call lifetime commitment into question. Exaggerated secularization casts doubt on what is essentially a religious consecration.

Within the Congregation, confreres who have given their lives generously to the service of the most abandoned by following Jesus, the evangelizer of the poor, are an eloquent witness to the Vincentian charism. The inherent demands and difficulties of that vocation are experienced by everyone. For some the burden is excessive. In certain instances this has led to lifestyles which are of dubious Vincentian character or to settling down comfortably in existing ministries to the detriment of our missionary vocation.

### **3. THE VOW OF STABILITY**

The three constitutive elements of the vow of stability are clearly expressed in articles 28 and 39 of the Constitutions, as well as in the different formulas for taking vows (C 58). These three elements are:

- 1. Fidelity and perseverance for life**
- 2. In the Congregation of the Mission**
- 3. In dedication to achieving its end as defined in the Constitutions:  
FOLLOWING CHRIST, THE EVANGELIZER OF THE POOR**

(C 1).

Concretely, the vow commits us to fulfilling the end of the Congregation "*performing the works assigned to us by superiors according to our Constitutions and Statutes*" (C 39). This last clause demands that all members be responsible for determining the Vincentian character of our works, but it places a special obligation on local and major superiors, since they have received the commission to make decisions about the creation or suppression of our works and ministries.

### **4. THE VIRTUE OF FIDELITY**

Today the term "stability" might not adequately convey what St. Vincent intended. It may therefore be best to move beyond the static tone of the term and highlight the dynamic meaning that it had in St. Vincent's mind from the beginning. What our tradition has meant by "stability" might better be expressed today by the

word "*fidelity*": **fidelity for life to the Vincentian charism in the Congregation of the Mission.**

This fidelity to following Jesus, the evangelizer of the poor, commits us to go beyond the juridical minimum of doing the works assigned to us by our superiors according to the Constitutions. Fidelity cannot be reduced to mere obedience, even less so if that implies something that is not active and responsible. The Evangelizer of the Poor calls us to live a life which is coherent with all the dimensions of the Vincentian charism. Consequently, fidelity, confirmed by the vow of stability, includes several elements:

- It implies a **personal response** to Jesus. The vow confirms our fundamental decision to accept the vocation to follow the Evangelizer of the Poor.

- On a **psychological** level the vow strengthens the missionary and enables him to overcome moments of crisis or difficulties.

- Since Vincentian consecration is in and for the mission, the vow gives a **missionary sense** to the other evangelical counsels (C 28). It focuses all of the energies of the confreres on the evangelization of the poor. It focuses our commitment beyond personal concerns to the dimension of service of others.

- Since St. Vincent called the first members to evangelize the poor **together** (C 19), the vow enjoins on the members a concern for the **common mission** of the Congregation.

- The vow performs a **prophetic function** in two ways: first, as a lifetime **commitment**, it is a sign of contradiction which transcends the instability that exists in many areas of society; second, as an option for the poor, it signifies **solidarity** with the weak and those who are often belittled.

## **5. LIVING STABILITY**

In addition to well-known, ordinary means, such as deep and constant prayer, the sacraments, the renewal of vows at special times of the year, retreats, community gatherings and celebrations, experience teaches fidelity is nourished by:

**The deep conviction that the Lord loves us as members of the Congregation of the Mission.** "God loves the poor and consequently he loves those who love them" (SV XI, 392). From that conviction flows a firm but humble determination to struggle until death with the risks, sufferings, sacrifices and crises which arise.

**Studying and knowing the tradition of the Congregation of the Mission.** Since it is impossible to love what you do not know, there is an irreplaceable value in immersing oneself in the history and spirituality of the Congregation, studying its Constitutions, norms and directives, and knowing the lives of great missionaries. We look to our tradition to understand how our predecessors incarnated the Vincentian charism in their time and their culture. A lively interest in present-day developments, both within and outside our own provinces, will help us understand how the Vincentian spirit is lived out today.

**Fostering a spirit of dialogue and friendship as brothers.** This will lead us to experience the Congregation as our family, with which we identify our lives. A dynamic spirit of community gives renewed life to our mission. It also establishes an environment which enables us to express openly to our brothers the personal difficulties that we might experience in persevering in our vocation.

**Maintaining and renewing the Vincentian character of our ministries.** Our apostolates should truly correspond to the end of the Congregation and the characteristics described in the Constitutions (C 12). This will be the basis for an honest evaluation of our present works (S 1).

**Direct contact with the poor.** Every member of the Congregation of the Mission should have the opportunity to experience the joy of direct contact with the poor. They can teach us many gospel values and encourage us to continue in this vocation (C 12, 3\_).

**Collaboration with others committed to working with the poor.** The Daughters of Charity (C 17), Vincentian lay movements (S 7) or other groups that promote human rights and work for social justice can enrich the way we live our own commitment (S 9).

## STABILITY: FIDELITY IN EVANGELIZING THE POOR

### *- Some Texts That May Serve for Meditation -*

1. "It is true that your request surprised me when I first saw it, as you guessed it would. And anyway, Father, how could it not have done so, on my seeing the doubt you have about your vocation now that you are eighteen or twenty years in the Congregation? You examined this during the retreat you made when you joined, again after the two years internal seminary, again after vowing to God to stay in the Congregation as you did several years ago. For, even though you did not renew them following the Brief, these original vows do not cease to be promises made to God, which one is bound in conscience to keep. After working so much in the Congregation, in various positions and with success, after all this, I say, you ask me if you have a vocation! Should I not be surprised at such a question? I will answer it, though, because you ask me to, and I tell you, Father, that, after all the above, God asks you to stay on till the end. All the thoughts opposed to this which occur to you are temptations from the evil spirit, who is jealous of your happiness in serving God.

But (you state) there are things I do not like; the vows and customs, as well as the spirit of the Mission, do not suit me, though I esteem them. But, Father, is there anywhere where you could be without disliking something? Does not every sort of lifestyle bring problems with it? And where can you see people who are happy about every detail of their life? Believe me, Father, that apart from the dangers to salvation which one has in the world you would find many crosses and unattractive things. And even if you were to leave and join another community, do not imagine, Father, that it would be free of problems: you would have to obey there, it would have its customs, just as we have ours, and they might not be of any greater appeal to you. When we think about some different situation we think about what would be pleasant in it, but when we are actually in it we experience what is annoying and against the grain. So, Father, relax and continue your voyage to heaven in the same ship in which God placed you. That is what I expect from his goodness, and from your wish to do his will." (SV VII, 291-293)

2. "What answer can I give, Father, to the question you ask me, other than what God himself lets you know, what learned and virtuous people have advised you, and what your own conscience tells you? Yes, Father, courage! If you give yourself readily to God he will give himself to you and fill you with his graces and choicest blessings. So, go ahead and do what you can and even, I will say, what you ought to have done in some way long ago; do, Father, what so many other senior and junior men have done, and be assured this will bring you relief. If you have stayed twenty years in the Congregation you will stay another twenty or thirty, because things will be no different in the future from what they were in the past. Apart from the fact that you will edify the others. Linking yourself to God, as they have done, our Lord will link himself to you more closely than ever and will be your strength in your weaknesses, your joy in your sadness, and your firmness in your wavering.



With regard to the matters about which you say you have doubts, these are merely temptations from the enemy of your well-being and the glory of Jesus Christ. For this vow to spend one's whole life in the service of the rural poor is to be understood according to the rules of obedience, so that if the superior does not appoint one to it one is not bound to go. How many are there who cannot do that work, yet they do not therefore cease to be real missionaries? Bursars in houses, teachers, even the superior general himself who clearly often cannot do it, are they less members of the body of the Congregation, and do they not fulfill their vow? You have been giving missions for twenty years; will you not be able to give them for another twenty? And if God helped you all that time, even though you had not fully given yourself to him, will he not certainly help you in the future when you are completely his? But, pushing the thing to extremes, if the superior thinks there is very obvious danger, will he not be able to dispense you from going?" (SV VII, 293-295)

3. "Do you not remember the lights God has so often given you in your prayer, causing you to take the resolution before his Divine Majesty and to testify publicly to the whole Company that you would rather die than leave it? And now, on the slightest pretext, when it is a question of neither death, nor blood, nor threats, you are surrendering without the resistance merited by such a promise made to God, who is constant and jealous of his honor, and who wishes to be served as he wills. He has called you to the Company; you have no doubt of that. He has even preserved you in it despite the efforts of your own father, who wanted to have you near him; and you preferred to follow the gospel rather than please him." (SV III, 482-483)

4. "As for your asking me if you might remain with the Missionaries without being a member, to work with them and still remain free, we will not do that. We have never granted this to anyone; it would encourage others to leave and to hope for the same thing. Naturally, everyone loves his freedom, but we must beware of this as of a broad road that leads to perdition.

So, then, Monsieur, please do not expect that, but give yourself to God to serve him all your life in the manner and in the state in which he has placed you." (SV V, 106-107)

5. "On the one hand, your letter consoled me greatly, when I saw how candidly you explained what is going on with you. On the other hand, it caused me the same distress St. Bernard once felt when one of his monks, under pretext of greater regularity, wanted to leave his vocation to transfer to another Order. That Father told him that this was a temptation and that the evil spirit would like nothing better than this change. The devil was well aware that, if he could lure him away from the first state, it would be easy for him to make him leave the second, and then to plunge him into a disorderly life, which is exactly what happened. What I can tell you, dear Brother, is that, if you do not practice continence in the Mission, you will not do so anywhere in the world; of that I can assure you.

So be careful that there is no fickleness in your desire for a change. If this is the case, the remedy, after prayer, which is necessary in all our needs, would be to consider that no state on earth does not experience times of repugnance and sometimes of desires to transfer to another. After reflecting on this, consider that, since God has called you to your present state, the grace of your salvation is attached to it, which he might deny you in another place where he does not want you to be." (SV IV, 592)

6. "That is why, Father, I most humbly beg you to act in this way and not to delay because of this matter, nor for the proposal you received to work on the translation of the Syriac Bible into Latin. Well do I know that the translation would be useful to the curiosity of some preachers, but not, to my mind, to the winning of the souls of the poor for whom the providence of God has destined you from all eternity. It must be enough for you, Father, that by the grace of God, you have devoted three or four years to learning Hebrew and know enough to uphold the cause of the Son of God in his original language and to confound his enemies in this kingdom. Imagine then, Father, that there are millions of souls stretching out their hands to you and speaking in this way: 'Alas! Fr. du Coudray, you who have been chosen from all eternity by the providence of God to be our second redeemer, have pity on us. We are wallowing in ignorance of the things necessary for our salvation and in the sins we have never dared to confess, and for want of your help we will certainly be damned.' Imagine further, Father, the Company telling you that for three or four years it has been deprived of your presence and is beginning to miss you. You are one of the first members of the Company and, as such, it needs your advice and example." (SV I, 251-252)

7. "I want to draw attention to these problems before they actually happen, because it may turn out that they will crop up. I cannot be around much longer; I will pass on soon; my age, the state of my health, the abominations of my life, will not allow God to put up with me on earth much longer. So, it may perhaps happen that after my death troublemakers and people lacking nerve will come along and say: 'What is the point in being saddled with looking after these hospitals? How can we possibly help so many people ruined by the wars, searching them out in their own areas? What is the use of taking on so many things and so many poor people? Why be involved with the Daughters who serve the sick, and why waste time with madmen?' There will be some, have no doubt about it, who will speak out against such work. And others will say it is too much to send men to far-off places, to India, to Barbary. But my God, O Lord, did you not send St. Thomas to India and the other apostles all over the world? Did you not give them charge and care of all people in general, as well as many individual persons and families? No matter, our vocation is *evangelizare pauperibus*." (SV XII, 89-90)

## CHAPTER III

### CHASTITY: CELIBATE LOVE

*"Our Savior showed clearly how highly he rated chastity, and how anxious he was to get people to accept it, by the fact that he wanted to be born of an Immaculate Virgin through the intervention of the Holy Spirit, outside the normal course of nature." (CR IV, 1)*

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

Charity is the heart of the gospel: love of God and love of neighbor. Therefore affective and effective love is the center of the Vincentian missionary vocation: "God has raised up this little Company, like all others, for his love and good pleasure. All aim at loving him, but they love him in different ways .... But we, my brothers, if we have this love, are bound to show it by leading the people to love God and their neighbor, to love the neighbor for God and God for the neighbor. We have been chosen by God as instruments of his immense and paternal charity" (SV XII, 262). The life of chastity, confirmed by our vow, has to be understood in the context of love, as a call from God to love more, to love better, to love universally.

#### 2. THE PRESENT SITUATION

Chastity is an opportunity and a challenge. We live it within the context of our own personal and cultural realities. Human maturity and personal growth in chastity involve balance and the ability to integrate various dimensions of our lives. Work, rest and recreation, community and social responsibilities, friendship, sexuality, the need to love and be loved are all elements that must be incorporated into a coherent pattern of living.

Besides our talents and strengths, we must also take into account personal weakness, which displays itself in: the tendency toward selfishness, a divided heart, the lack of consistency in one's life, the seeking of comfortableness, self-centered or immature manifestations of sexuality.

The various situations in which the Congregation tries to inculturate the gospel and the charism of the community give rise to new and difficult questions regarding celibate commitment. These same questions, however, invite us to promote a

dialogue between culture and the gospel, in order to discover new riches in the gift of chastity.

In today's society there are positive signs which can support our celibate life: the commitment of chaste celibate lay people; the witness of couples whose homes are centers of Christian values and who live the gospel intensely; new communities that share the Word and try to put it into practice. All these people animate us to search for the profoundly evangelical sense of total dedication to the Lord and his kingdom in a chaste, celibate life.

The celibate life is also affected by social realities which are not completely positive: false images of love; the consumer society, which, for motives of profit, entices us toward sensuality; the tendency to separate sexuality and love; the weakening of institutions which promote faithful love; an immoderate attention to the body. These influences make celibate commitment difficult.

### 3. THE VOW OF CHASTITY: CELIBATE LOVE

By the vow of chastity we opt for a life of celibate love in following Jesus, the evangelizer of the poor. Underlying this option is the conviction that this vocation promises freedom and joy and self-realization in the service of others.

*"We embrace, by vow, perfect chastity in the form of celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of heaven"* (C 29 § 1). Chastity involves interior and exterior continence, according to one's state in life, so that a person's affectivity and sexuality are lived out with deep respect for others and for oneself; celibacy presupposes the renunciation of marriage and the sexual expressions proper to it. For the missionary, these two elements of the vow - chastity and celibacy - are external manifestations of a total dedication of one's life. They should be perceived as the undertaking of a **particular responsibility: the service of the poor**, not as the rejection of familial responsibility. The demands of a radical following of Jesus lead the missionary to offer himself completely for the cause of the kingdom.

### 4. CELIBATE LOVE

Celibate love begins with the humble recognition that it is God's gift; it is a project which is undertaken in fidelity to a call. This enterprise involves the whole person in a commitment to live and love for the sake of the kingdom.

The model and motive of our chastity is Jesus Christ. Everything that the Lord did was directed toward announcing and establishing the reign of God. In the same way, missionaries wish to manifest by their celibacy and chastity the complete

orientation of their lives to the proclamation of the Good News to the poor. The source of celibate love is found in the God of Jesus Christ, who has called us to dedicate our whole lives to the evangelization of the poor. Only his grace can make it possible to live the gift of celibate chastity. We accept and cultivate this gift with humility, because we recognize our own fragility and vulnerability.

In celibacy the missionary renounces sharing life with only one person in order to dedicate himself completely to the mission: *"In this way we open our hearts more widely to God and neighbor"* (C 29 § 2). We become not just free from the responsibilities of family but free for the demands of evangelizing the poor. The commitment to chastity consists in using this freedom for a radical participation in the end of the Congregation, channelling all of our physical, spiritual and affective energies into an effective preaching of the Gospel and a close personal relation with the poor.

The celibate, like any other person, is called to integrate the various human dimensions of life. He has not given up the need to love and be loved, nor his human affectivity or sexuality. No one can renounce generativity and the need to be creative. The vow excludes certain ways of expressing these basic human needs, but, precisely because of this, it also requires other expressions. Friendship and the community are two privileged areas for discovering healthy ways of expressing and receiving love and for integrating sexuality and affectivity maturely into a harmonious life project. Ministry and service are appropriate fields for creativity and generativity.

Love is always demanding. It is important for us to recognize the distinctive demands of celibate love. The missionary must be willing to pay the price of a great sacrifice in order to follow Jesus single-mindedly and to serve his brothers and sisters, the poor, better. The Paschal Mystery is always present in the following of Jesus. Like Christ the Lord, the missionary does not seek suffering or pain, but accepts the cross in order to love in fidelity and to enter into a more fruitful life (Mk 8:34; Jn 12:24). Beyond this personal dimension, the missionary's participation in the dying and rising of the Lord also performs a prophetic function: it points to the relative value of all things in comparison with the kingdom of God, which is already present and not yet fully revealed. On another level, because Vincentian chastity is destined toward the service of the poor, it calls to mind the dignity of those whom society considers unimportant.

The painful experience of loneliness is inevitably a part of a celibate's life. The grace of God, accepted faithfully, makes it possible to transform loneliness into a creative energy for serving the poor and loving our brothers in the community.

## 5. LIVING CHASTITY

**An Intimate Relationship with Christ.** The following of Jesus focuses on his person, and not on an idea. Therefore the missionary's entire life should be rooted in intimacy with the Lord. The chaste and celibate missionary knows that he cannot walk alone without Christ's presence. It is Christ who strengthens us to live chastely for the sake of the kingdom. It is he who makes celibate love possible in the midst of personal difficulties and the challenges of the world. Prayer and the Eucharist are two privileged ways of encountering Christ that are essential for celibate love.

**Apostolic Fecundity.** Our vow of chastity also serves to promote our evangelizing mission to the poor. Generous self-giving to others in the apostolate confers positive meaning to celibate love and fosters faithful chastity. Mission and service are two of the principal expressions of generativity and creativity. Human promotion, expressed in solidarity with those whose lives are ravaged by poverty and suffering, moves chaste love beyond the boundaries of purely personal concerns to the realm of social concern.

**Community Life.** The following of Jesus can be understood and lived only in friendship and fraternal relationships. True fraternal communion (C 30) supports the missionary in his response to the gift of celibacy which he has received. Community life should be a privileged space for expressing the affectivity that is a part of everyone's life.

**Friendship and Prudence.** St. Vincent was a man of rich affectivity. There are numerous examples in his life of how he developed sincere, deep friendships while living an authentically chaste life. Today the missionary also needs a similar experience of loving and being loved. Healthy friendship, which leads to apostolic zeal and creates freedom and mutual support, is a way to live celibate love with joy. The missionary finds himself in the middle of a complex world, full of grace and sin. It is crucial that he know how to discern which situations, actions, and persons lead him to the freedom of Christ and which do not. These judgments must always take into account the radical commitment to follow Jesus.

**Humility and Mortification.** The decision to follow Christ in celibacy opens up new possibilities for truly loving, but, at the same time, it involves renunciation of the genital expressions of love which are legitimate in matrimony. The missionary needs to be sincere with himself and with the Lord, and should recognize which situations and relationships are not conducive to celibate love. He must take into account his own weaknesses without self-deception. The missionary cannot presume on his own strength (CR IV, 2), but he counts on the presence of Christ in his life. There are moments when fidelity to Christ means sacrifice. St. Vincent recommends serious mortification of the interior and exterior senses, and knowing how to avoid ways of expressing affectivity and sexuality which are not in keeping with a celibate life (CR IV, 2-5; SV XI, 70-71).

**Honesty.** The missionary lives out chastity within his humanity with all its strengths and weaknesses. Realities like loneliness and the integration of sexuality and affectivity must not be denied if they are to be integrated successfully into a mature personality. We must speak about them sincerely with God and with other people who can support us. Honesty with a spiritual director and a confessor is indispensable for orienting our celibate life.

## **CHASTITY: CELIBATE LOVE**

### ***- Some Texts That May Serve for Meditation -***

1. "Our Savior showed clearly how highly he rated chastity, and how anxious he was to get people to accept it, by the fact that he wanted to be born of an Immaculate Virgin through the intervention of the Holy Spirit, outside the normal course of nature. Christ allowed himself to be falsely accused of the most appalling charges, following his wish to be overwhelmed with disgrace. Yet he loathed unchastity so much that we never read of his having been in even the slightest way suspected of it, much less accused of it, even by his most determined opponents. For this reason it is very important for the Congregation to be strongly determined to possess this virtue. And we must always and everywhere uphold it in a clear and decisive way. This should be more obviously our practice since mission ministry almost all the time brings us into contact with lay men and women. Everyone, therefore, should be careful to take advantage to the best of his ability of every safeguard and precaution for keeping this chastity of body and mind intact." (CR IV, 1)

2. "Who is better off, someone who loves God but ignores others, or someone who loves others because he loves God?... `To go into the heart of God and make that the whole extent of your love is not the most perfect love, because the fulfillment of the law consists in loving God and others' (St. Thomas). Show me a man who loves only God, a soul lost in contemplation who never thinks about his brothers; this person, finding great delight in this way of loving God, who seems to him to be the only thing worth loving, limits himself to enjoying this infinite source of joy. And then look at someone else who loves others, who, even if he is crude and thick, loves others because of his love for God. Which type of love, I ask, is purest and least selfish? The second, of course; there is no doubt about that, and that person fulfills the law more perfectly. He loves God and others; what more can he do? The first person loves only God, but the second loves both God and others. We really must give ourselves to God so as to impress these truths on our souls, to organize our lives according to his spirit and to carry out what this love calls for. There are no people in the world more obliged to this than ourselves, no community which should be more assiduous in hands-on, heartfelt, love.

Why? Because God brought this little Company, like all others, into existence for his love and good pleasure. All communities aim at loving him, but in different

ways: Carthusians by solitude, Capuchins by poverty, others by chanting his praises. But if we have love we must show it by bringing people to love God and one another, to love other people for God and to love God for others." (SV XII, 261-262)

3. "Our vocation, then, is to go, not to one parish or even to one diocese, but all over the world. And for what purpose? To inflame the hearts of men, to do what the Son of God did. He came to spread fire on the earth in order to enkindle it with his love. What else should we wish except that it may burn and consume everything? Please reflect on that, dear brothers. It is true, then, that I am sent, not only to love God but to lead others to love him. It is not enough for me to love God if my neighbor does not love him. I must love my neighbor as the image of God and the object of his love. I should act in such a way that others in turn will love their Creator, who knows and acknowledges them as his brothers and has saved them. I should act in such a way that they will also love one another for the love of God, who loved them so much that he gave his own Son over to death for them. That, then, is my obligation." (SV XII, 262-263)

4. "There is physical purity and mental purity. Someone who has physical purity, cannot, just for that, be said to be chaste. It is mental purity which informs this virtue and gives it its perfection, even its essential ingredient. It excludes from one's thoughts, mind, memory and imagination all evil thoughts. That is precisely what we have to do: root out from the heart, etc., if we want to have the chastity the rule expects of us, remembering that our Lord, in coming into the world, made such an issue of this that he wished to change the nature of things and be born of a virgin. It is because of this virtue that it is said that virgins will accompany the Lamb wherever he goes, and that they will sing new songs. Oh, what emphasis the whole Company, and each individual member, should put on this virtue, and do everything possible to possess it and advance in it more and more!

But what help can we get for this? Control of our senses, is what the rule tells us. Controlling what we look at. How dangerous sight is, roaming here and there over all sorts of things! What a bad thing that is! David, that holy man, when he looked at a woman fell into the sin of unchastity, and sank even further because to that sin he added another, that of murder; you know the story.

Hearing, control of what we listen to. You have heard confessions in the country, and even in towns, and you know that many people learned about impurity from those performers, those comic actors who portray unchaste conduct with matching dialogue. Yes, that is something dangerous!

Control of the senses, then: what we look at, what we look at, I say; yes, what we look at, what we listen to, and so on for the other external senses, what we touch; to get as much control of our senses as we can. Sight, hearing, touch." (SV XII, 418-419)



5. "[In the name of God], hold fast, and do not surrender your weapons. The glory of God is at stake, as well as the salvation of perhaps a million [souls] and the sanctification of your own. Remember, Father, that you have God with you, that he fights along with you, and that you will certainly overcome. He [the demon] can bark but he cannot bite; he can frighten you but not harm you, and I can assure you of that before God, in whose presence I speak to you. Otherwise, I would be very doubtful about your salvation, or at least that you might render yourself unworthy of the crown Our Lord is preparing for you, while you are laboring so successfully for him. Confidence in God and humility will obtain the grace you need." (SV III, 128)

## CHAPTER IV

### POVERTY: SOLIDARITY WITH THE POOR

*"Christ himself, the Lord of all, lived in poverty to such an extent that he had nowhere to lay his head. He formed his apostles and disciples, his co-workers in his mission, to live in the same sort of way so that individually they did not own anything." (CR III, 1)*

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

The term, poverty, is not understood in the same way by theologians, sociologists or those studying the evangelical counsels. Socio-economic realities that differ from continent to continent color the meaning of poverty in each country. Nonetheless, while recognizing legitimate differences in the understanding and practice of poverty, a certain core of meaning remains. As with the other evangelical counsels, **Vincentian poverty takes its meaning in reference to the mission**, so that the poverty of the Congregation of the Mission is one that imitates Christ, the evangelizer of the poor, and is inspired by and oriented to the mission. This basic criterion is the touchstone by which the missionary (**personal poverty**) and the Congregation (**communal poverty**) uncover an authentic Vincentian way when confronted with the different understandings and practices of evangelical poverty.

#### 2. THE PRESENT SITUATION

Material poverty is the unchosen condition of most of the human race. The daily reality for large sectors of the population in every country is the struggle to obtain the basic necessities of life. Illiteracy, unemployment, hunger and illness continue to exist despite all of the recent technological advances. The suffering of millions is not an occasional occurrence caused by isolated individuals. Societies and economies have institutionalized oppression, covertly or patently. In the words of Paul VI, "There are certainly situations whose injustice cries to heaven" (*Populorum progressio*, 30). For the poor, poverty is an evil to be escaped.

While impoverishment marks the lives of many, abundance exists for a few. Society holds out the constant invitation to have more and use more. The accumulation and consumption of goods is at times converted into an absolute value without reference to other human values and needs. The use of wealth takes on a purely private character, admitting no social responsibility.

The two extremes of wealth and poverty create a tension for the members of the Congregation. The misery of so many of our brothers and sisters can create within us a longing to live a form of poverty we can never hope to achieve. While the poor experience true poverty, our houses and works distance our lives from theirs. For some members of the community this situation plagues their conscience. For others it breeds indifference to the question of lifestyle.

The media constantly encourage us to conform to the values of the mainstream. Living comfortably is an attractive possibility which easily becomes an end in itself. The ideology of exaggerated economic independence, which St. Vincent sought to avoid, is not unknown in the Congregation.

### 3. THE VOW OF POVERTY

The Vincentian vow of poverty can be understood only in light of a decision to follow Jesus the evangelizer of the poor. Underlying any discussion of the vow is the fundamental option to hand over one's life for the sake of the kingdom. Otherwise, the concrete formula of the vow of poverty, which describes the **juridical minimum** that we must do, tends to overshadow our **radical consecration** for mission. Doing the least bit possible in order to stay within the bounds of the vow is a questionable way to live our self-gift, even if it is legally acceptable.

Historically St. Vincent faced the problem of creating a community of goods, available for mission, without making this community "religious." The **juridical problem** of not being identified with religious life and the **practical problem** of not dividing the community along economic lines was resolved in the formulation of the vow, explained in the fundamental statute.

The traditional formulation of the vow simply states: *"By reason of our vow we need to have the consent of the superior according to the Constitutions and Statutes when we use or dispose of goods"* (C 34). Dependence on the superior is the Congregation's visible form of practicing poverty. The true sense of the permission, besides being a help for the superior in the animation and good order of common life, offers the missionary a means for discernment. *"But since his (the superior's) consent is scarcely enough to promote the spirit of poverty, each member must weigh what is more suitable and conformable to our life and ministry, according to the spirit of our Founder as expressed in the Common Rules"* (C 34). The needs of the poor, personal and community commitments, pastoral responsibilities, the Vincentian tradition and the fundamental statute on poverty are some criteria, among others, which guide the process of making decisions about poverty.

### 4. THE VIRTUE OF POVERTY

Vincentian poverty presupposes patterning one's life on the example of the poor Christ, who evangelized the most abandoned. For St. Vincent, missionary poverty was the fruit of contemplating Jesus who, "made himself poor though he was rich, so that you might become rich by his poverty" (2 Cor 8:9b). By practicing poverty, the members of the Congregation "*will show that they depend entirely upon God, and their evangelization of the poor will become more effective*" (C 31).

St. Vincent, following a long Church tradition, distinguishes between interior and exterior poverty. Both poverty as a *way of being* and poverty as a *way of having* are necessary. Without an exterior manifestation **spiritual poverty** is not credible. Without spiritual motivation **material poverty** may often be evil. "To renounce the goods of this world exteriorly and to maintain the desire to have them is to do nothing, it is a joke and it is keeping the better part" (SV XI, 247).

The free decision to accept the kingdom of God relativizes all other values. St. Vincent underlines a fundamental motivation for voluntary poverty when he reminds us that "it is renunciation, surrender, abandonment" (SV XI, 246). The goal of poverty, its interior core, is to follow Jesus freely and to participate in his mission to evangelize the poor. All customs, rules, and practical decisions about Vincentian poverty flow from that. **The vow not only commits us to the juridical minimum** of asking permissions; it also challenges us to find ways of using our goods to pursue our missionary vocation.

The Vincentian mission places us in the world of the poor. Solidarity with our brothers and sisters calls us to a simple lifestyle (C 33). When he wrote: "No one should go in for useless or exotic things. Each one, too, should keep his needs within moderate limits and curb his hankering after such things, so that his lifestyle as regards food, room, and bedding is that of a poor person" (CR III, 7), Vincent reminded us that an intimate connection exists between our lifestyle and our ministry. The willingness to abandon material comfort and security, at least in some measure, makes the service of the poor possible and credible. That is why St. Vincent called poverty the rampart of the Congregation (CR III, 1). On one level a simple lifestyle manifests to the marginalized our desire to stand with them in solidarity. On another level it challenges a society that marginalizes and abandons the poor.

Vincentian poverty fosters a community of service. The communal dimension of our vocation goes beyond simply placing material goods in common. Rather, our common goods exist to promote fraternal union, so that each member's needs are met, mutual assistance is a concrete reality, and economic inequalities and divisions disappear (C 32, 35). We share our goods so that we will be united in the service of the poor.

Our communal apostolic goals demand that the Congregation of the Mission has and uses material goods for the evangelization of the poor. In this context poverty involves the wise administration of goods. Recognizing that "we live from the

patrimony of Jesus Christ, from the sweat of the poor" (SV XI, 201), the Congregation tries to use its goods generously for their sake (C 33). At the same time, all of the members are responsible for maintaining and caring for the goods entrusted to them.

Our proximity to the poor asks us to assume, as much as possible, something of their condition. "We should always think, when going to the refectory: `Have I earned the food I am about to eat?'" (SV XI, 201). Just as the poor must labor in order to make a living, missionaries are bound by the universal law of work in accord with the end of the Congregation and the community plan (C 32 § 1).

## 5. FUNDAMENTAL STATUTE ON POVERTY

Early in the history of the Little Company, St. Vincent thought about formulating guidelines on poverty. Prudence suggested the advisability of distinguishing between a confrere's personal goods and those of the community. Experience indicated the need to clarify the nature of Vincentian poverty in legal terms. After several attempts, Vincent obtained the brief, *Alias nos*, from Pope Alexander VII in 1659. This statute is still normative, according to our Constitutions (C 35).

Given the fact that members of the Congregation can own property, St. Vincent's concern was to avoid economic divisions in the community and to promote freedom for service. The fundamental statute aimed to do this. The General Assembly of 1980, acknowledging the changes in the economy which have taken place since the seventeenth century, gave an interpretation of this statute. This interpretation does not change the statute; rather, it makes its obligations explicit.

The fundamental statute mentions immovable goods. This concept comes from an era when land, real property, was the chief source of income. The term **immovable goods** literally means "possessions that cannot be moved" (e.g., a building or a field) or things that are physically mobile but considered to be immovable by the law (e.g., a door or a window). **Movable goods** are personal property which can be moved (furniture, books, money, etc).

The statute's concern is with property which is income-producing. It states that **missionaries maintain ownership of immovable goods**. However, they **do not have free use** of these goods and need the superior's permission to employ them. *Alias nos* did not mention movable goods. In the seventeenth century such things as bank accounts, stocks and bonds or money markets were not in common use by the population at large as sources of wealth. For that reason the General Assembly of 1980, in its explanation of the statute, considers **some movable goods as sources of income** or as the equivalent of immovable goods. In other words, the Assembly interprets the statute today to mean this: confreres maintain ownership of income-producing property, movable or immovable, but need the superior's permission to use them.

The members of the Congregation of the Mission do not need permission to maintain their personal property (repairs, etc.) and may dispose of it as they wish in a will or testament. However, according to the statute, a missionary may only employ the yield of this property (interest, rent, dividends) for his personal use with the **superior's permission**. "This is a **permissive norm**," not a positive recommendation (Interpretation, A 4). In fact, St. Vincent, commenting on the statute, affirmed: "The use of these goods is not for the individual; he has no need of them; the Company provides for his needs" (SV XII, 383).

Members who possess personal property are obliged to apply the yield or income in pious works (charity, social benefit, etc.) and, above all, for needy parents and relatives (*Alias nos*). The Constitutions add that our personal goods should also be used for the other members "*avoiding distinctions among us*" (C 35). These positive norms complement the negative norms of the statute, by urging us not only to avoid amassing fortunes but encouraging us to use our goods for others.

The explanation of the fundamental statute (B 4) recalls that our Constitutions highlight the **communal dimension** of Vincentian poverty (C 32, § 2). The fruits of one's labor (stipends, salaries, royalties) belong to the Congregation. Moreover, benefits which come to a confrere after incorporation, such as pensions, insurance or social security, become property of the community. This is a consequence of our commitment to form a community of goods and to contribute to the well-being of the other members.

The fundamental statute on poverty (*Alias nos*) and the explanation of the 1980 General Assembly offer practical directives for living poverty. But they are not the only points of reference for our practice of poverty (B 4). In order to understand the spirit and intention of the statute, we should also take into account:

- our commitment to the evangelization of the poor;
- poverty of spirit (cf. SV XII, 377-386; CR III, 4, 7);
- community of goods (CR III, 3, 4, 5, 6);
- conformity of our life to the life of the poor (cf. CR III, 7);
- the universal law of work (cf. SV XI, 201ff.);
- that the fruits of our work belong to the Community;
- that community goods are to be considered the patrimony of the poor;
- that we may not, either as individuals or as a community, keep goods non-productive or not invested, with the result that they are not of benefit to the poor.

## 6. LIVING POVERTY

**Avoid accumulating goods.** The goal of our poverty is freedom for mission. Vincent knew that attachment to material possessions was a danger: "... then we could bid good-bye to the works of the Mission and the Mission itself ..." (SV XI, 79). A simple lifestyle is a practical means to avoid the temptation to spend our energies on

building up our own fortune or on maintaining a comfortable existence. We must be willing to feel the "bite of poverty" even when other possibilities exist.

**Using our goods for others.** Our vow permits us to retain ownership of personal possessions. The practical realities of our apostolic life demand that the community should have material resources. Since we do not completely abandon material goods, the practice of poverty is tied to the way we use what we have. The great danger is that personal property and community assets get channeled only into meeting our personal needs and wants. Generosity with our goods (also with our time and talents) fosters a spirit of detachment and freedom.

**Personal contact and sensitivity to the poor.** Although our mission to the poor does not exist primarily for our own benefit, insertion into the world of the poor helps transform our vision and our lives. The poor not only lack the superfluous, but often even the basic necessities of life. They are the victims of institutionalized injustice, oppression and scandalous socio-economic inequalities. Personal contact makes us sensitive to their sufferings, hopes and desires. It enables us to learn from their example of generosity in the midst of want and necessity. The poor can evangelize us by transforming our charity from a private exercise in compassion into solidarity lived out concretely.

**Dependence on the Community.** According to the Constitutions, the *"administrators should provide willingly for the needs of members in all matters which concern their life, particular office, and apostolic work"* (C 154 § 2). Dependence on the community, lived in a mature fashion, stimulates a fraternal spirit of concern and shared life. Dependence is also manifested in the seeking of required permissions. This implies, concretely, that each province indicate clearly the types of expenditures for which it is necessary to ask the permission of the superior. When, for example, provinces provide a monthly allotment for confreres, there should be clear norms regarding the amount and uses of such an allotment. There should also be concrete norms regarding the necessary permissions for expenditures made with personal money, since such monies are to be used in conformity with our Fundamental Statute on Poverty as explained by the General Assembly of 1980.

**Support for Community.** Communal poverty is not just a question of receiving from the community. A concern for the well-being of other members is the other side of the coin. Stipends and other remunerations for apostolic work done in the name of the community are not payment for personal projects. These should be handed over for the good of all the members as an expression of our concern for and identity with other members of the Congregation.

**Frequent evaluation.** Following the poor Christ as missionaries involves continual conversion. Because the practice of poverty is "a condition for renewal and a sign of progress in our vocation in both the Church and the world" (S 18), a frequent evaluation of our personal and communal practice of poverty is a means toward on-going transformation. The meetings for formulating the house plan and examining the

budget are two moments for reviewing our use of material possessions in the light of the Constitutions, provincial norms and the needs of the poor.

## **POVERTY: SOLIDARITY WITH THE POOR**

### ***- Some Texts That May Serve for Meditation -***

1. "I shall have the pictures and books you want sent to you, but I feel it my duty to tell you, Father, that we are living at a time when no unnecessary expenses should be incurred. Public misfortune surrounds us on every side. It is to be feared that it may reach us also, and even if it should not, we must be compassionate toward those who are enduring it. Perhaps, once you have laid in your provisions and taken stock of all domestic and related needs, you will be of the same mind about economizing the meager fund you have found." (SV IV, 277-278)

2. "Everything that God does he does for the better; so we have to hope that this loss will be good for us since it comes from God. For the just everything works out well, and we have the assurance that by accepting misfortunes as coming from God they are turned into joys and blessings. So, Fathers and Brothers, I ask you to thank God for the way this affair has turned out, for the loss of this property, and for giving us the attitude of accepting this loss for love of him. It is a big loss, but his adorable wisdom knows well how to have it turn to our benefit, in ways which for the present remain unknown to us but which you will see some day. Yes, you will see that, and I hope that the admirable way in which you have behaved in the face of such an unexpected misfortune as this will serve as a foundation for the grace God will grant you in the future of making the best use of all the afflictions which it will please him to send you." (SV VII, 251-252)

3. "We would give great scandal if, after such a formal judgement, we were to take legal proceedings to overturn it. We would be accused of being too attached to possessions, a standard anti-clerical accusation, and we would be wronging other communities and causing our friends to be scandalized at us if we were to make a big issue of it in the palace.

We have reason to hope, Sir, that if we seek the kingdom of God, as the gospel says, we will not lack anything, and that if the world takes something from us on the one hand God will give us something on the other, which we have experienced since the upper court took this land from us; for God has permitted that a lawyer from that same court who has just died should bequeath us almost as much as that property was worth." (SV VII, 406)



4. "Poverty, then, is the voluntary giving up of all worldly possessions for the love of God, doing so in order to serve him better and to think about one's salvation; it is a renouncing, a shedding, an abandoning, an abnegation. This renunciation is both external and internal, not merely external. It is not enough just to give up, openly, all one's possessions; this renunciation must be internalized, it must stem from the heart. In addition to the possessions one must get rid of attachment to them and affection for them, becoming totally stripped of any liking for the perishable things of this world. Openly giving up one's possessions while at the same time retaining the wish to have them is meaningless, it is a mockery and a holding back of what is most important. God asks mainly for the heart, and that is the main thing." (SV XI, 246-247)

5. "If we have possessions we do not have the use of them, and that is how we are like Jesus Christ who, while having everything, had nothing; he was master and lord of the entire world, he had made all the things which are in it; for love of us, though, he chose to deprive himself of their use; although he was lord of the whole world he became the poorest of men, having even less than the least of the animals: 'The foxes have dens, the birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head' (Mt 8:20). O Savior, Savior, what will become of us if we have a liking for earthly possessions? What will become of us, in the wake of the poverty of the Son of God? Let those who have possessions not wish to make use of them if they have given this up; and let those who do not have any not want to have some!" (SV XI, 224-225)

6. "So, Fathers and Brothers, there you have the two reasons which oblige us to keep the vow of holy poverty: because we have given our word on it to both the superior and God. The third one that occurred to me is that without this vow it is impossible to live tranquilly in a community like ours; not only is it impossible to live there well, but even to stay there long is impossible. So, Fathers and Brothers, in the third place what I say is that it is extremely difficult, even impossible, for someone whose head is filled with the wish to have possessions to be able to carry out his duties among us and to live according to the rules he has accepted, and follow the ordinary routine of the Congregation. And how could a man who thinks of nothing but his pleasure, of giving joy to his heart, of living the good life, of spending his time in diversions (for that is what those who have this insatiable desire for possessions really intend), how could such a person do the work of the Mission properly? It is not possible...

O Savior! Is that being a missionary? He is a devil, not a missionary. His mentality is that of the world. He is already in the world in his heart and in his preferences, and only his carcass is in the Mission. Looking for comfort, getting enjoyment, living it up, getting noticed, that is the worldly mentality, that is what he wants, that is his spirit." (SV XI, 237, 240-241)

7. "I was wondering recently if it were true that poverty is so beautiful, and what is the beauty of such a virtue that St. Francis called his lady. How ravishing it is! It struck me that it is endowed with such excellence that if we had the chance of seeing

it even ever so slightly we would immediately be overcome by love of it and we would never want to be separated from it, we would never abandon it and we would rate it above all the world's goods. Oh, if God were to give us the grace to draw back the curtain which stops us from seeing such beauty. Oh, if he were, by his grace, to remove all the veils which the world and our self-love cast in front of our eyes, Fathers and Brothers, we would be immediately overcome by the charms of this virtue, which overcame the heart and affections of the Son of God. It was the Son's virtue; he wanted to have it as his own; he was the first who taught it; he wanted to be its teacher. Up to his time nobody knew what poverty was; it was unknown. God did not want to teach us about it through the prophets, he reserved it to himself, and he himself came to teach it to us. It was completely unknown under the old law; only wealth was appreciated; no one took any account of poverty, not realizing its merit." (SV XI, 245)

8. "Being a missionary is like being an apostle and it involves, as it did for the apostles, leaving and abandoning everything in order to follow Jesus Christ and become real Christians; many in the Congregation have done just that, leaving their parishes and coming here to live in poverty, in other words in a Christian way; and, as a certain person said to me recently, only the devil could find something to say against the Mission. To go from village to village, for example, to help the poor people save themselves and get to heaven, as you can see is being done. Take, for example, Fr. Tholard who is doing so at the moment, also the Abbé de Chandénier, and where they even have to sleep on straw." (SV XI, 163)

9. "We all want to be Our Lord's disciples. Now, since your call to his service have you felt this love and this affection for holy poverty? We gave ourselves to God for this in order to be his disciples, and we cannot be that without it, without taking on poverty. If we have not done so then we cannot be a disciple of Our Lord to the same extent as if we had done so. But as well as this, if we have not done so sufficiently completely, sufficiently perfectly, let us do so now and give ourselves to God so as to commit ourselves to poverty as fully as possible." (SV XII, 389)

10. "In the course of a conference to his community Fr. Vincent said that the missionaries would be really happy if they were to become poor through showing charity to others, but that they need have no fear of becoming so in this way unless they lacked trust in our Lord's goodness and in the truth of his word.

If, however, God were to allow them to be reduced to the need of going to work as village curates to earn their livelihood, or even if some of them would be obliged to go begging for bread, or to sleep in rags at the corner of a hedge perishing from the cold, and someone were to come along and find them in such a state and ask one of them: 'Poor priest of the Mission, what brought you to this extremity?,' what a happiness, Fathers and Brothers, to be able to answer: 'Charity.' How greatly this poor priest would be appreciated in the sight of God and his angels!" (SV XI, 76-77)

## CHAPTER V

### OBEDIENCE: DISCERNMENT FOR MISSION

*"There is something great and divine in this virtue, since Our Lord loved it so much from his birth to his death, since he performed all the actions of his life out of obedience." (SV XII, 426)*

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

St. Vincent wanted his missionaries to be obedient like Jesus, who always did the will of his Father. Our obedience, then, is a constant search to formulate decisions about our personal goals and community plans within the light of God's salvific plan. As members of a community that professes to dedicate itself to God for the evangelization of the poor, discernment of God's will should be one of the hallmarks of our lives. It profoundly influences our relationship with God, but also brings us into close contact with others, as we try to listen to the voice of the Lord together.

#### 2. THE PRESENT SITUATION

The complexity of modern life gives rise to a new context for living evangelical obedience. There is a growing awareness of the value of the human person and the rights of individuals. We are more and more conscious of the importance of self-expression and the need to participate in the decisions that affect our lives. Everywhere people demand respect for different opinions, ideas, cultures and practices and expect the right to question or criticize authority. The principle of subsidiarity, recognizing the legitimate autonomy of individuals and of institutions, has taken on new importance as autocratic methods give way to democratic styles of governing in society. Even though these ideas are frequently honored more in theory than in practice, they still form the basis for contemporary thinking.

There is, however, a negative side to this reality. A distorted sense of personal liberty, which highlights rights and downplays responsibilities, fosters egoism and an environment of exaggerated individualism. Abuse of power, expressed in the betrayal of public trust or in a lack of respect for human rights, or even direct oppression, has led some to view authority with suspicion and others to adopt a lifeless passivity before authority.

The Congregation has not remained unaffected by contemporary developments in society. Many steps have been taken for promoting dialogue and participation in community decisions. Our Constitutions explicitly call us to a spirit of mutual responsibility (C 96, 97). There are at times, however, problems in living this out. Some local communities still encounter difficulties in finding the means to foster communication. Greater personal freedom has, at times, led some to search for personal security and to choose ministries based on personal preference rather than on the communal call of the mission.

With the expansion of the Congregation into parts of the world where there are very distinct cultures (e.g., in Asia and in the nations of the southern hemisphere), different concepts of authority have begun to confront us. This produces some tension between western notions of obedience and the ways that other cultural traditions come to decisions. Much sensitivity will be needed to discover how best to understand the essential meaning of obedience in these new situations.

### **3. THE VOW OF OBEDIENCE**

In the Congregation, we dedicate ourselves to Jesus' mission of evangelization. This central inspiration is the foundation for our vow of obedience. Following Christ, the evangelizer of the poor, carries with it the commitment *"to be obedient to the will of the Father manifested to us in many ways"* (C 36). Rather than adding on something optional, the vow makes explicit an essential element in our vocation.

Our new Constitutions highlight the communal orientation of Vincentian obedience and its missionary end. *"To participate in this mystery of the obedient Christ requires us all to seek, as a community, the will of the Father"* (C 37, § 1). Obedience involves a conscious search for the meaning of our mission and for the specific ways of carrying it out. This kind of discernment is the responsibility of every member of the Congregation (C 96).

Because the Spirit of God speaks through all, authority in the Congregation, which is a function of seeking and acting on God's will, is undertaken in a spirit of dialogue and consultation (C 97). Superiors have the delicate task of promoting the discernment of God's will and the ultimate responsibility for decision-making. *"They should engage in dialogue,"* but they *"retain the authority to decide and command what is to be done"* (C 97, § 2). *"By reason of our vow we are obliged to obey the pope, the superior general, the provincial, the local superior and their substitutes when they give us a command in accordance with our Constitutions and Statutes"* (C 38, § 1). This means that the members will *"strive to obey superiors as promptly, joyfully and perseveringly as they can"* (C 37, § 2).

#### 4. THE VIRTUE OF OBEDIENCE

At the core of Jesus' redemptive mission lies his unconditional obedience to the Father. This filial obedience is the immediate consequence of a life totally given over to the Kingdom of God. Christ's obedience is passive in the sense that he submits to the human condition and accepts suffering and death. But it is, above all, active because he consistently offers himself to do his Father's will.

St. Vincent saw in Jesus not only a model to admire, but also an example to follow. The following of Christ means entering into the mystery of his life and taking on his mission. Faced with the Master's example, the missionary is challenged to identify his life completely with the reign of God. Convinced that the kingdom is God's work and gift, St. Vincent recommended that we never move ahead of Providence (SV I, 68, 69). But, he also wanted the Congregation to cooperate actively with the Father's will in historic situations: "When it comes to doing a good work, say to the Son of God: O Lord, what would you do if you were in my place?" (SV XI, 348).

Missionary obedience is the gift of oneself in total availability for the evangelization of the poor. This option makes God's reign and its in-breaking in the lives of the poor the primary point of reference for our life. Obedience moves the missionary to be less attached to his own desires and frees him to be more concerned with God's liberating will for the poor. The freedom that comes from identifying ourselves fully with God's point of view makes obedience **prophetic**. When fidelity to God becomes our principal motivation, all our other motives and plans become subordinate. Obedience challenges not only our own personal desires and goals, but those of the larger society as well.

Since ordinarily we know God's will through human mediation, obedience demands a process of discernment. The missionary needs to listen to God's voice not only in his own heart; he must, at the same time, pay attention to how God speaks through the needs of the poor, the signs of the times, the world, the Church, the community, and legitimate authority. Attentive listening is a **community project** which summons us to dialogue in sincerity as brothers and to search together for God's will. Obedience also demands that, after dialogue, we implement, through concrete projects and actions, what we perceive as God's will.

As part of the communal dimension of our obedience, some members are entrusted with positions of authority in order to promote and implement our mission. The responsible exercise of this authority obliges superiors to discern the will of God along with the other confreres. Neither superiors nor other members should readily identify their personal will with God's will or substitute private plans for the community mission. All missionaries have to take into account the community and its judgments when making personal decisions. While we try to achieve consensus on decisions that affect our life and ministry, for many reasons that is not always

possible. Even when we are not fully in agreement, obedience means a willingness to accept and support the decisions of the community and those in authority. It also implies our taking responsibility for the commitments and decisions made in community.

## **5. LIVING OBEDIENCE**

**Relationship with Jesus.** Jesus, ever obedient to the Father, is the inspiration for our obedience. An intimate union with Christ in prayer and attentiveness to his word play a key role in obedience to God's will. He calls us to listen with docility to the impulses of the Spirit. We must constantly challenge our own ideas, opinions and actions with the values of the Kingdom.

**Attention to the Signs of the Times.** Since God's presence is manifested in concrete life situations, it is imperative that we understand the world and especially the situation of the poor. Close contact with the poor enables us to listen to God with them, who is present in the midst of their suffering. Study and social analysis are indispensable means for discovering the signs of the times.

**Simple Dialogue.** Since God's will is rarely self-evident, dialogue is necessary for living obedience. Honest communication among all the members of the community, especially with superiors, makes true discernment possible. Members of the Congregation should take advantage of structures which already exist, such as: provincial and local plans, meetings, consultations, visitations, etc. Moreover, other means for promoting communication and discernment should be created.

**Responsible Initiative.** Creativity and initiative are part of a resourceful response to God's call in history. Even from the time of initial formation, the spirit of personal responsibility and respect for legitimate differences needs to be fostered. At the same time, the obedient missionary has to know how to submit his creativity and initiative to the needs of the poor, the good of the community, and the decisions of the superiors. Mutual responsibility for the local community plan will be a sign of our solidarity and obedience.

**Humility.** Obedience is born of humility. Only those who are humble, like the poor, can put aside their own opinions in order to listen to the wisdom of others. Only humility keeps prophecy from falling into self-righteousness. Humility reminds us that the search for God's will is an on-going enterprise in which no one can claim always to have the correct response.

**Mortification.** Obedience to God's will sometimes demands renunciation. On occasion God interrupts our plans and asks us to put aside personal priorities for the sake of the Kingdom. The willingness to sacrifice one's own desires for the good of the mission and the needs of the poor makes obedience both difficult and meaningful.

Ironically, one of the areas in which it can be most difficult to be obedient is in the willingness to assume the mantle of leadership.

**Formation for Leadership.** Since superiors bear a special responsibility for promoting discernment, and not simply good order, they need to be prepared for the ministry of leadership. The provinces should provide resources to prepare local superiors for their service to the confreres.

## **OBEDIENCE: DISCERNMENT FOR MISSION**

### *- Some Texts That May Serve for Meditation -*

1. "Our Lord, Jesus Christ, taught us obedience by word and example. He wished to be submissive to the Most Blessed Virgin, St. Joseph, and other people in positions of authority, whether good or disagreeable. For this reason we should be completely obedient to every one of our superiors, seeing the Lord in them and them in the Lord. In the first place we should faithfully and sincerely reverence and obey our Holy Father, the pope. We should also humbly and consistently obey the most reverend bishops of the dioceses where the Congregation has houses. Furthermore we should not take on anything in parish churches without the approval of the parish priests." (CR V, 1)

2. "What are we to do, then, so as not to waste time and effort? The answer is, never to act from self-interest or by mere whim, but to get into the habit of doing God's will in everything; in everything, mind you, not just in some things. It is this sanctifying grace which makes both the act and the person acceptable to God. How consoling it is to think that when I keep my rules, when I do my job, when I obey superiors and when I turn to God to offer him all these things, that is how I make myself constantly acceptable to God. That means that we must ask for sanctifying grace, receive it and put it to use; otherwise, all is lost.

'Many will say to me,' Jesus Christ said, and I was talking to you about this recently, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy, expel demons, and practice virtues in your name?,' and he will answer: 'I never knew you; away with you, evil-doers.' 'But, Lord, the prophecies, the miracles, done in your name, do you call those evil deeds?' 'Away from me, you evil men, I do not know you.' 'Well who, then, will get into the kingdom of heaven?' 'Those who will do the will of my Father who is in heaven' (Mt 7:21-23).

Our Lord, then, will never say to someone who has tried always to follow God's good pleasure 'I do not know you.' Quite the contrary, that is whom he will bring into his glory. O Savior, grant us the grace to fill ourselves with this desire, never to bear wild fruit, but that all we do may be done for you and by you, so that

they are acceptable to your Father; please move us to make this fidelity our own and to carry out all our work according to your will.

Let us give ourselves to God, my brothers, paying attention and remaining firm in this, for in doing so, what reason will we not have for praising God? What a look he will direct towards the Congregation as a whole and to each individual member! Anyway, *in nomine Domini*. That is plenty on the motives which urge us to make a habit of the practice of doing God's will in all things, and to make us resolve to follow our Lord's maxim: *`Cibus meus est ut faciam voluntatem ejus qui misit me,'* *`My food is to do the will of him who sent me.'*" (SV XII, 156-157).

3. "We must give ourselves to him without delay at this very moment, holding nothing back, so that he will be pleased to draw us to this life of his chosen ones, to strip us of so much self-will and self-centeredness which prevent God from taking undisturbed and total possession of us. What is to prevent us all, here and now, from making a joint declaration of surrender to his divine goodness? So, let us say to him: *`King of our hearts and souls, here we are, humbly prostrate at your feet, surrendering completely to you in obedience and love. Once more we dedicate ourselves, totally and for ever, to the glory of your Majesty. We beg you with all our hearts to bring about your reign in the Congregation and to give it the grace of putting its management into your hands, with no one deviating from this, so that all of us are guided by the way Our Lord and his followers lived.'*" (SV XII, 134)

4. "Let us ask him, my brothers, to grant us the grace to get ourselves into that frame of mind in which we are always guided by God, with him leading us by the hand into the presence of His Majesty. O my Savior, free us from having any preferences, like a beast of burden who does not care whether he carries one load or another, whether he is with a wealthy owner or a poor one, whether he is in this country or that; it is all the same to him; he waits, he moves on, he suffers, he works night and day; nothing takes him by surprise.

My God! That appeals to me, I would love to do the same, but I see clearly that I am a prisoner. I have difficulty in detaching myself from the things I like; for example, if I am not named to preach, if I am not assigned work, if my opinion is not taken, if people do not think well of me. I would have great difficulty in giving in to certain persons. However, with your grace, my God, I can do anything. I am not asking to be an angel nor like an apostle; in a certain sense I am that already. What I want, my God, is merely the flexible approach you give to animals, the courage to suffer which you give to soldiers and their fidelity to military order. O my brothers, how embarrassed we would be if we were left behind by ordinary soldiers and lowly beasts in matters which are so pleasing to God, matters which his own Son was pleased to experience personally. Embarrassment, Fathers and Brothers! Do not heed this wretch talking to you; of all people he is least worthy of hoping for such a happy state, because of the poor use I have made of my freedom and the graces given me by God when I have loved things other than him. Fathers and Brothers, let us hand ourselves over to his infinite goodness, confident that he will rid us of this earthly



preference in which we have steeped ourselves. It is a question of trying to eliminate preferences, letting go of our own opinion, our own will, our own inclinations, and everything which is not God; it is an active virtue; if it is not in action it does not exist. We have got to work at this, my brothers, we have got to get down to it often and always, and tomorrow at prayer; why not?" (SV XII, 236-237)

5. "‘But,’ someone will say, ‘I am an old man.’ You are an old man! So what! Should you, for that reason, be less free of preferences, less virtuous?"

‘But I am a highly qualified man.’ Wait a moment. He is highly qualified! And because he is, he does not need to be free of preferences, does not need to be ready to do what the superior or office-holder asks of him. I ask you, is that objection reasonable? Should it come from the mouth of someone who has undertaken to serve God?

‘But, Father, he is a holy man.’ I am glad he is a holy man! Well, is that a reason for exempting him from doing what is wanted of him, what he is ordered to do, from obeying this superior who is, if you like, less perfect than he, less qualified and, even, if you like, someone in whom there are obvious defects? Once again, is that a valid objection? Obviously not at all. And it should not in any way exempt him from having a spirit of detachment with regard to work: to go out into the country, if he is sent; to stay at home, if that is what is wanted; to be part of a seminary staff or to give a mission; to stay in this house or that other one; to go to far-off countries or not; to obey this superior or another one, since God wants him and he has been judged suitable for leadership and authority." (SV XII, 48-49)

6. "Learning is not absolutely necessary for being in authority, but when learning and leadership skills and sound judgement go hand in hand in the same person, O God, what a treasure!

Seniority is not always to be taken into account in the appointing of superiors, since one sees many young men who have more talent for leadership than many older and more senior men. David is an example of that; he was chosen by God to lead his people although he was younger than all his brothers. Look, a man who has sound judgement and great humility is able to exercise authority well, and I have had experience of men who are the opposite of this and who thirst for power – they achieve nothing worthwhile.

Experience has also shown me that a man who has been in authority and has held on to that mentality and wishes to be in charge was never either a good community member or a good superior." (SV XII, 49-50)

## CHAPTER VI

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF VOWS IN THE CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION

*"We have resolved to seek His Holiness' approval of our vows unceasingly." (SV XIII, 327)*

#### 1. THE EXPERIENCE OF THE FOUNDER AND THE FIRST MISSIONARIES

Our vows have their origin in the experience of St. Vincent and the first confreres. According to St. Vincent himself, as early as 1627 or 1628, some of the first members freely chose to make vows. Partly because of his positive appraisal of this experience and partly because of his concern about the loss of good missionaries, St. Vincent began to formulate the idea of introducing vows into the Congregation as a norm for all the members (SV V, 457).

From the start, this project raised the juridical problem of how to introduce vows into a "secular" Congregation like ours without its becoming another religious order in the strict sense of the term. Resolving this question would require some "holy, ingenious means" (SV III, 246); that is, a way of combining the secular character of the Congregation of the Mission with some of the values of religious life, such as the evangelical counsels, without sacrificing our apostolic nature in the process.

#### 2. YEARS OF SEARCHING AND CLARIFICATION (1639-1640)

The letters from these years illustrate how clear St. Vincent was about the need for vows, but also how uncertain he was about what type of vows and their number. In November 1639, he wrote to Fr. Lebreton, to whom he had assigned the task of obtaining approval of the vows in Rome, saying: "We thought it advisable to request that solemn vows not be made. Those who have completed their two years in the seminary will make the four simple vows and those who have completed their first year in the seminary will make a good resolution to live and die in the Company in poverty, chastity, and obedience to the bishops *circa missiones* and to the Superior General *circa disciplinam et directionem societatis*" (SV I, 600).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"... obedience to the bishops *regarding the missions* and to the Superior General *regarding the discipline and direction of the society.*"

Three months later, on February 28, 1640, St. Vincent again wrote to his agent in Rome: "I find myself perplexed about the doubts that occur to me and the decision to make concerning the last method I suggested to you: whether it would be sufficient to make a vow of stability and, with regard to the observance of poverty and obedience, to proclaim a solemn excommunication against those who have laid money aside in their own keeping or elsewhere. This should take place in Chapter on a certain day of the year (at which everyone would be obliged to be present and to hand over what he had to the Superior). That is what the Carthusians do. The same could be done against the disobedient; or else, whether, instead of excommunication, we were to have them make a solemn oath every year to observe the rule of poverty, chastity, and obedience." He goes on to ask Fr. Lebreton to find out from the experts if the vow of stability would give the Congregation the character of a religious order (SV II, 28).

By the end of the same year he had changed his opinion again. On November 14, 1640, Vincent wrote to Lebreton: "I think we shall decide to make the Good Purpose of living and dying in the Mission, the first year in the seminary; the simple vow of stability in the second year of the said seminary; and of making it solemnly in eight or ten years, as the Superior General sees fit" (SV II, 137-138).

At least five or six other variations were sent to Rome in these years as Vincent struggled to find the most convenient structure for vows in the Congregation of the Mission.

### **3. ORDINANCES OF THE ARCHBISHOP OF PARIS (1641)**

Finally, after many changes of direction, St. Vincent submitted a request for approval of the vows to the archbishop of Paris. According to the bull of foundation, *Salvatoris nostri*, the archbishop of Paris had been delegated to approve the norms for the Congregation which the Superior General might think necessary. After some delay, Paris approved the norms for vows on October 19, 1641. This document stated that:

- after the first year of the internal seminary, good purposes of living and dying in the Congregation and of observing poverty, chastity and obedience were made;
- after the second year of the seminary, simple vows of poverty, chastity, obedience and stability were made;
- the vows would be simple and could be dispensed only by the pope or the superior general;

- the vows would be made during mass in the presence of the superior, without anyone's "receiving" them in the name of the Church;
- the Congregation would not be considered as a religious order because of these vows, but would remain as part of the secular clergy (SV XIII, 285).

If St. Vincent thought that the approval by the archbishop would settle the question of vows and make them normative for the whole community, he was surprised by the reaction to the ordinances. Many confreres opposed the introduction of vows as a requirement for all. Some thought that the archbishop's action changed the nature of the Congregation. Others thought that he had no authority to act in the case. Some considered the vows taken under the ordinances as null since the Holy See had refused to approve the vows. Still others felt that the reservation of the dispensation to the pope and the superior general had no basis in canon law. Whatever the reason, many confreres chose not to make vows under the ordinances of 1641.

#### **4. THE ASSEMBLY OF 1651**

His good experience at the assembly on the Common Rules in 1642 moved St. Vincent to convoke another to resolve the problem of the vows, which had caused some division in the community. In July 1651 he called eight superiors and a few older confreres to Paris to discuss the issue. They were asked to treat the question of whether the practice of pronouncing vows should continue and to resolve the difficulties which had arisen.

The members of the assembly spoke with great frankness during their sessions. In the end, the assembly decided that it was good to keep the vows, but that approval from the Holy See was necessary. The Acta state: "The first point was on the difficulty that has arisen in regard to the practice of making vows, which the entire assembly agreed should be kept. And in order to make it more authentic, we have resolved to seek His Holiness' approval of them unceasingly" (SV XIII, 326-27).

#### **5. *Ex commissa nobis* - THE PAPAL APPROVAL OF VOWS (1655)**

It was not easy to obtain from the Holy See what the general assembly had decided. Difficulties arose which put the tenacity of St. Vincent and his envoys in Rome to the test. Finally on September 22, 1655, Pope Alexander VII approved the

vows of the Congregation of the Mission with the brief, *Ex commissa nobis* (SV XIII, 380-382).

The vows approved in the brief are substantially those that the Company had been making and that had been approved in the ordinances of the archbishop of Paris: simple vows of poverty, chastity, obedience, and stability which could be dispensed only by the pope or the superior general in the act of dismissal. These vows did not alter the secular nature of the Congregation.

With the issuing of this brief, the practice of making vows ceased to be a point of debate and became the norm for the whole Company.

## **6. *Alias nos* - THE FUNDAMENTAL STATUTE ON POVERTY (1659)**

Until nearly the end of St. Vincent's life, the meaning of our vow of poverty remained a disputed question. Since, according to *Ex commissa nobis*, members of the Congregation of the Mission were not religious and did not make solemn vows renouncing all property, they could maintain personal possessions. This subtlety had the potential for dividing the community. In order to foster common life and our mission, Vincent submitted a statute on poverty to the Holy See. Alexander VII, in the papal brief, *Alias nos*, approved the fundamental statute on poverty, which recognized the right of missionaries to own things, but restricted how they might use them.

## **7. SUBSEQUENT HISTORICAL QUESTIONS**

In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the reservation of the dispensation from vows to the pope and the superior general became a question. Some members left the community claiming that their confessors had granted them a dispensation. A variety of other reasons were presented as justifications for voluntary departure. In 1670 in the brief, *Alias felicis recordationis*, Clement X declared that no confessor could give a dispensation from the vows of the Congregation of the Mission. Benedict XIV reaffirmed the reserved status of our vows in 1742 with his bull, *Quo magis uberes*.

In the twentieth century the Congregation had to find new ways to formulate the vows consonant with developments in canon law. The Constitutions of 1954, trying to bring our proper legislation into line with the Code of Canon Law of 1917, described our vows as privileged, non-public, simple, and perpetual (Art. 161, § 1). The moral consequences of the vows were set forth in detail, as well as the requirements for validity (Art. 161, 162 and Chapters 3-4). In line with the tendency of the Code of Canon Law and the Roman Curia in those years to make all

communities similar to religious, the Constitutions of 1954 also added the new practice of making temporary vows.

The General Assembly of 1968-1969 began to adapt our norms, as well as the life of the Congregation, to the directives of the Second Vatican Council and later ecclesial documents. This work was finished by the 1980 General Assembly. The Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, taking into account the new Code of Canon Law, approved our new Constitutions on June 29, 1984.

The present Constitutions define our vows as: *"perpetual, non-religious, and reserved, so that only the pope or the superior general can dispense them"* (C 55, § 1). This new formulation abandons the classification of our vows as not public, privileged and simple for a new term: **non-religious**. Although this formula is negative, it clearly distinguishes our vows from those of religious.

## CHAPTER VII

### CANONICAL ASPECTS OF THE VOWS IN THE CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION

#### 1. THE NATURE OF THE VOWS

The deepest meaning of the vows of the Congregation comes from their relationship to the mission. They exist to promote the evangelization of the poor. The canonical aspects of the vows try to capture that fundamental insight of St. Vincent in legal terms.

The Church's legislation permits Societies of Apostolic Life to choose the nature of the bond by which they assume the practice of the evangelical counsels (Canon 731, § 2); the Congregation of the Mission chose vows (C 3, § 3). The present Constitutions describe our vows as: "*perpetual, non-religious, and reserved, so that only the pope or the superior general can dispense them*" (C 55, § 1).

The adjective *perpetual* requires no explanation, but the second qualifier, *non-religious*, does need some interpretation. The Code of Canon Law defines a religious institute as "a society in which members, according to proper law, pronounce public vows ..." (Canon 607, § 2). A public vow is described in Canon 1192, § 1: "A vow is public if it is accepted in the name of the Church by a legitimate superior." In religious profession, a candidate offers himself to a community approved as a religious institute and makes public vows. The superior receives the person *as a religious* and accepts the vows in the name of the Church. All of this means that these vows are made in a religious congregation, approved as such by the Church. The nature and effects of these vows are determined by the common law of the Church.

The vows of the Congregation of the Mission are not public, which means that no one accepts them in the name of the Church. The juridical concern here is to distinguish an apostolic institute from religious institutes. The non-public nature of the vow is not determined by the number of persons present when a missionary pronounces vows, nor does it mean that the vows are purely a private matter. The language seeks to separate our vows from religious vows. In our case, the Church recognizes that the **effects and meaning of the vows are determined by our proper law**, not the universal (public) law of the Church.

The fact that no one accepts our vows in the name of the Church does not mean that the Church does not approve the vows nor recognize the Congregation. The Church has given its official approval to the Congregation in *Salvatoris nostri* and to its vows in *Ex commissa nobis*. Rather, it means that the Church does not approve

them as religious vows in a religious institute. They are approved as another type of vow as defined in *Ex commissa nobis* and the Constitutions.

Something would be missing if our vows were only defined in negative terms in relation to religious institutes. The Constitutions recommend that the vows be interpreted according to St. Vincent's intention, approved by Alexander VII in *Ex commissa nobis* and *Alias nos* (C 55, § 2). The sources for a positive understanding of our vows, then, are the mind of our founder and the two documents mentioned.

Whenever he spoke about the vows, St. Vincent was very careful to indicate that they were not religious vows made in a religious order. Apostolic congregations had only begun to make their appearance around the seventeenth century. Canonical practice and language had not developed to include this new form of apostolic life. St. Vincent, therefore, emphasized that the vows were made in a "secular" congregation dedicated to the mission. His concern was to avoid some of the elements essential to religious life which would impede the evangelization of the poor. But he also wished to express in the language of his time the fundamental direction of the **Vincentian vocation as a mission and a call to holiness in and for the world**. The term, "secular," used in our tradition from the time of our foundation, does not mean that we are diocesan priests living in community; it means that we are priests and brothers living together in community while remaining in vital contact with the world's needs, especially those of the poor.

The new canons for Societies of Apostolic Life (CJC 731-746) offer categories that provide a clearer, more positive framework for understanding the nature of the Congregation of the Mission and its vows. The new law emphasizes the mission of these societies and gives ample space for developing structures for fulfilling the mission. Vows made in the Congregation of the Mission, a society of apostolic life (C 3, § 1), are **vows for mission**.

## 2. INCORPORATION

By incorporation admitted members acquire all of the rights and obligations expressed in the Constitutions, Statutes, and Provincial Norms (C 59, § 2). Full membership in the Congregation establishes a permanent mutual relationship between the confrere who has been incorporated and the community. The candidate offers himself to the Congregation in order to participate fully in its life and mission. The Congregation, in turn, incorporates the member, pledging its support.

Incorporation occurs when, upon request by a member, a major superior gives that member permission to make vows and the vows are pronounced (C 57, § 1). Vows and incorporation happen simultaneously, but are distinct. Properly speaking, it is the superior's permission to make vows which brings incorporation. Nonetheless, incorporation takes effect only at the moment when vows are pronounced.



Incorporated members have the right to active voice (that is, voting) in the Congregation (C 60). To enjoy passive voice (that is, eligibility for various offices and duties), a member must be incorporated for three years and be at least twenty-five years of aged (C 61).

### **3. ADMISSION TO VOWS**

The right to admit a candidate to vows pertains to:

1. *"the superior general, with the consent of his council and after consulting the candidate's moderators, for the entire Congregation"* (C 56, § 1);
2. *"the provincial, with the consent of his council and after consulting the candidate's moderators, for his province"* (C 56, § 2).

### **4. CONDITIONS FOR ADMISSION TO VOWS**

Canon 735, § 1 establishes the general principle: "The admission, probation, incorporation and training of members are determined by the proper law of each society." The universal law says nothing about the conditions for incorporation or admission to vows for Societies of Apostolic Life like the Congregation of the Mission. Although some are not explicitly stated, the following conditions have to be taken into account:

- that the petition be made without force, grave fear or fraud (Canon 656, 4\_);
- valid completion of the internal seminary;
- a minimum of two years and a maximum of nine years as an admitted member, having made good purposes one year after entering the internal seminary (C 54, § 1, § 2);
- permission for vows by the competent superior (C 56);
- pronouncing of vows in the presence of the superior or a member appointed by him (C 58, § 1);
- use of one of the formulas in article 58 of the Constitutions or another formula approved according to Statute 24.

Nothing is mentioned in our proper law about the precise moment for the pronouncing of vows. Traditionally, vows have been made during the celebration of the Eucharist (SV XIII, 285).

## 5. CERTIFICATION OF THE PRONOUNCING OF VOWS

Vows and incorporation into the Congregation are not just personal concerns. Incorporation, which occurs at the time of vows, involves the whole Congregation and establishes a contract between the confrere and the community. For that reason, Article 58, § 2 of the Constitutions states that the request for vows should be made in writing and that there should be a written attestation afterwards that vows have been pronounced. The same article requires that the superior general be notified about the taking of vows.

## 6. DISPENSATION FROM VOWS

The vows of the Congregation of the Mission are **reserved**, so that only the pope or the Superior General can dispense them. The superior general can grant an indult of departure to an incorporated member for a grave reason and with the consent of his council. Along with the indult of departure, he can give a dispensation from vows (C 71). If the member seeking the dispensation is a priest or deacon, the Superior General may grant it only in accord with Canon 693, upon the cleric's finding a "benevolent bishop."

The Constitutions do not mention the grave causes which would justify departure from the community and dispensation from vows; nor does canon law contain a norm that applies directly to Societies of Apostolic Life. However, Canon 691, § 1 offers a basic orientation: "One who is professed in perpetual vows is not to seek an indult to leave the institute without very grave reasons weighed before the Lord ...."

In cases of expulsion from the community, whether they are automatic dismissals, as mentioned in C 73, or in the cases mentioned in C 74, an explicit dispensation from vows is not necessary, since the vows cease with legitimate expulsion. Every decree of expulsion requires confirmation from the Holy See according to Article 75 of the Constitutions, except the cases indicated in Article 73 of the Constitutions. When the decree of dismissal has been confirmed, it should be communicated immediately to the member and he should be given the opportunity to appeal to the Holy See (C 75).

With lawful departure and dispensation from vows, all mutual legal rights and obligations between the member and the Congregation cease. Although those who are

separated from the Congregation have no legal claim for work done while in it, the community should practice equity and evangelical charity toward former members (C 76).

## FORMULAS FOR THE VOWS

### 1. *Direct formula:*

Lord, my God, I, NN., in the presence of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, vow that I will faithfully dedicate myself, in the Congregation of the Mission, for the whole time of my life, to the evangelization of the poor, after the example of Christ evangelizing. Therefore, with the help of your grace, I vow chastity, poverty, and obedience, according to the Constitutions and Statutes of our Institute.

### 2. *Declarative formula:*

I, NN., in the presence of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, vow to God that I will faithfully dedicate myself, in the Congregation of the Mission, for the whole time of my life, to the evangelization of the poor, after the example of Christ evangelizing. Therefore, with the help of God's grace, I vow to God chastity, poverty, and obedience, according to the Constitutions and Statutes of our Institute.

### 3. *Traditional formula:*

I, NN., unworthy (priest, cleric, brother) of the Congregation of the Mission, in the presence of the Most Blessed Virgin and of the whole heavenly court, vow to God poverty, chastity, and obedience to our superior and his successors, according to the Rules or Constitutions of our Institute; I vow also that I will dedicate myself, in the aforesaid Congregation, for the whole time of my life, to the salvation of the poor country people. For this purpose, I humbly call upon Almighty God to help me with his grace.

4. "In special circumstances, a provincial assembly may propose for the approval of the superior general, with the consent of his council, its own formula for making good purposes or taking vows, preserving the essential elements of the established formulas." (Statute 24)

**5. FORMULA for the ATTESTATION  
OF THE TAKING OF VOWS**

I, \_\_\_\_\_

unworthy \_\_\_\_\_ of the Congregation of the Mission,  
[first, middle, last name] [priest, deacon, brother, etc.]

born in \_\_\_\_\_ in the Diocese of \_\_\_\_\_  
[place] [name]

on the \_\_\_\_\_, son of \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_,  
[day, month, year] [father's name] [mother's name]

received into the internal seminary at \_\_\_\_\_  
[name of institution]

in \_\_\_\_\_ on the \_\_\_\_\_,  
[name of place] [day, month, year]

took the vows of the Congregation according to its Constitutions, which I understand well, at \_\_\_\_\_  
[name of institution]

in \_\_\_\_\_ on the \_\_\_\_\_, in the  
[name of place] [day, month, year]

presence of Father \_\_\_\_\_,  
[first, middle, last name]

who is a member of the same Congregation.

\_\_\_\_\_  
[Signature of the one vowing]

\_\_\_\_\_  
[Signature of the witness]

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