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# GIVE ME PEOPLE WHO PRAY....: A RESOURCE BOOK FOR VINCENTIAN MORNING AND EVENING PRAYER

*John H. McKenna, C.M.*

## **Introduction**

The basis for this presentation is the Introduction by the Superior General at the very beginning of the Resource Book plus the Editor's Preface and the Introduction to each section.

I wish to emphasize here at the beginning, and will do so again at the end, the Resource Book is **not an "editio typica,"** to be translated or followed slavishly. It is still quite provisional and intentionally so.

Here I will simply treat the history and the content of the book.

## **History**

In 1993, as you know, Fr. Robert P. Maloney, C.M., our Superior General, established a Commission on Prayer. The context was our renewal as a community. The General Assembly of 1992 spoke of New Evangelization, New Men, New Communities. His desire was that we would be thoroughly renewed in our mission, in our persons, and in our life together. He felt that there was already much to be thankful for in this regard. But much of what we do in our life and ministry will be empty unless there is a deep spiritual renewal among us. So he established the commission to explore ways of enhancing our communal prayer in light of the Constitutions (art. 40-50). The members of the commission were John McKenna, C.M. (USA), Urban Osuji, C.M. (Nigeria), Manuel Nobrega, C.M. (Portugal), Bernard Schoepfer, C.M. (France), and Luis Alfonso Sterling (Columbia). The commission first met in Rome from December 8 - 13, 1993.

In his orientation for the commission, Fr. Maloney noted that after seven years of visiting the Provinces his experience had been that the confreres are generally faithful to prayer but that our common prayer is often far from beautiful and far from attractive to young people. On the other hand, he had experienced new communities whose prayer is strikingly beautiful and to which young people flock, for example, the community of San Egidio, in Rome. He hoped that the Congregation would develop prayer forms which are, to use the words of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, "something beautiful for God," and attractive to the young.

He asked the commission to be guided by the following principles as they sought to help us renew our common prayer:

- a. it should be beautiful
- b. it should be simple
- c. it should attuned to the prayer of the Church
- d. it should be flavored by the Vincentian tradition
- e. it should be flexible (adaptable to different situations)

In a revision of our prayer, he listed as possibilities:

a. a form of morning and evening prayer adapting the structure of the breviary to our own tradition. This could be done by using a modified cycle of psalms that might be grouped around certain themes linked with our tradition and the needs of the universal Church, using some readings from St. Vincent, providing time for meditation and sharing after readings, modifying the petitions to focus on some of our Vincentian concerns, and integrating some of our traditional prayers, like the De Profundis and the Expectatio Israel.

b. some models for sharing our faith during prayer, as recommended in Article 46 of our Constitutions, for example, meditating on readings from St. Vincent and then sharing our thoughts, meditating on the Sunday readings and preparing the Sunday homily together, some form of Revision de Vie.

c. a compendium of Vincentian hymns and of revised Vincentian prayers.

d. ways of promoting mental prayer.

e. some suggested ways in which our Vincentian prayer could be open to others, e.g., those involved in parish or school work.

Fr. Maloney rightly noted that the post-Conciliar reform of the Breviary has been one of the least successful and wondered if we could not create something characterized by the above mentioned principles of simplicity, beauty, etc. He invited the commission members to begin by sharing their own experiences of common prayer with its high points and low points and, especially, any experiences which had really been "something beautiful for God" and attractive to the young.

In addition, he suggested that the commission consider a "Vincentian Book of Prayer." The advantage of a book is that it can be placed in people's hands, be used as a tool for ongoing education, and serve as an aid in praying. The disadvantage is that it can become an inflexible code. But his hope was that the commission would come up with something *concrete*. There are already many theoretical, and official, documents urging us to pray, he

said. Now we need to find the appropriate *means* and then actively encourage confreres to engage in those means.

In the sessions that followed, the commission members shared their experience of prayer within the Congregation and outside it. They attempted to analyze the principles or guidelines which Fr. Maloney had offered and to come up with some tentative ideas in regard to the content and form of a possible resource book on Vincentian Prayer.

The **guidelines** were developed as follows:

***a. Simplicity***

- a prayer marked by a simplicity befitting poor people
- a book that is simple or easy to use

***b. Beauty***

- makes use of symbols, audio-visual aids
- takes time necessary to prepare well
- the book itself should be attractive
- integrates different forms of music (includes cultural adaptation)
- is conscious of the need for rhythm, cadence, pace, and silence

***c. The liturgical tradition of the Church***

- the basis of the renewal of our prayer will be the Liturgy of the Hours as proposed by the Church
- the purpose of the commission is **not** to create a Vincentian breviary

***d. The Vincentian tradition***

- respect for the feasts of the Congregation
- new ways to enliven traditional exercises
- development of a Vincentian book of prayer
- a prayer for God in view of the mission
- a prayer with a Vincentian flavor, e.g., Lauds or Vespers with a Vincentian theme once a week

***e. Flexibility***

- a prayer with either one or two or three psalms (or perhaps no psalm at all)
- a prayer marked by silence, reflection
- intercessions which take into account the local situation
- a prayer that is open to diverse situations, e.g., that of a student, a professor, a missionary
- a prayer which makes the link between the psalms and the subject of meditation
- a prayer that is contemporary

***f. Participation***

- a prayer in which different types of people could participate, e.g., lay people, sisters, brothers, priests
- a participation that is active, alive, popular, enhanced by song
- a prayer which involves the body and its different senses

The **tentative content** of a possible book was outlined as:

***a. Introduction***

- desire for a Vincentian prayer that is contemporary
- desire for a prayer that will renew the spirit of unity among us
- an introduction written by the Superior General
  - a summary of the guidelines given by the General, e.g., simplicity, flexibility, etc.

***b. Chants and hymns***

- a collection of Vincentian chants and hymns (adapted to each country)
- some traditional and universal melodies for international gatherings
- some simple, lively chants
- some hymns in the Vincentian spirit, e.g., the beatitudes

***c. Vincentian texts***

- a collection of readings and exhortations which could be used in different circumstances
- a source for reading and for prayer
- some sort of a schema for meditation on texts of St. Vincent
- some texts for meditation, e.g., on Jesus, on the poor, on the virtues
- some maxims from St. Vincent, St. Louise, the common rules, the Constitutions

***d. Vincentian prayers***

- a variety of schemas or models of prayers
- some traditional and some new prayers from the Vincentian family
- some prayers of St. Vincent, St. Louise, and Vincentian saints or blessed
- some universal prayers: models, refrains, litanies

***e. The Bible***

- psalms which would characterize our Vincentian spirit
- a choice of texts, e.g., psalms, gospel pericopes, other
  - antiphon like introductions to the psalms which would be simple and dynamic

***f. Celebrations***

- a variety of samples

Finally, a **provisional form** of a possible book was discussed. It might consist of:

a. An Introduction

b. Some sample celebrations

c. Some resources

- chants and hymns
- biblical texts, e.g., psalms and gospels
- texts of St. Vincent (themes)
- prayers (traditional, universal, other)
- symbols and signs (both universal and those proper to the Vincentian family)

In December 1993, after discussing the matter with the Superior General and the General Council, the commission decided on a broad consultation which, through the Provincials, invited the confreres throughout the world to respond to the following questions:

a. When you have had a good experience of communal prayer, what were the elements which made it good?

b. Would a Book of Vincentian Prayer (which contained such things as some models or examples of celebrations; hymns or chants which are Vincentian and/or reflect our Vincentian tradition; texts and prayers either from the Bible or from our own heritage which express our Vincentian mission and spirit) be helpful? If so, what would you suggest as its content?

c. Would you please send us examples of hymns, texts, and prayers which you think would be helpful for such a book?

The confreres reaction to the consultation was encouraging. It was enlightening as well.

To the first question, a number of responses frequently appear. The attitudes which the confreres bring to prayer are seen as very important, for example, the desire to pray, constancy in prayer, unity and respect for one another, common pastoral interests. A good number spoke of the importance of active participation in morning and evening prayer and a number expressed the desire to have our prayer opened to lay people. Another frequent concern was pace and tempo, that the prayer not be rushed. Music that is simple and appropriate, whether sung or played, enhanced the experience. A number of confreres mentioned the environment or the arrangements of the place as important, whether this were the chapel or elsewhere. The confreres also expressed a desire for variety and flexibility which would enable the adaptation of our prayer to different groups, occasions, and/or cultures. Symbols such as water, a candle, icons, were seen as helpful. Finally, the confreres frequently mention shared prayer or "repetition of prayer" and periods of silence as elements that enriched their experience.

The response to the second question about the usefulness of a Vincentian Book of Prayer was overwhelmingly positive but a number of the confreres suggested a period of experimentation prior to publishing such a book. In general, they stressed flexibility when discussing a book. As for the content, the suggestions varied widely. There were a number of requests for a book of Vincentian meditations, although several of those requesting such a book realized that this might not be the task of the commission. Quite a few of the confreres provided texts and/or bibliographies which were very diverse.

After reflecting carefully on the responses of the confreres, the commission members were ready for the next step in the process and the General once again asked the confreres to help. He requested the Visitors to appoint a team or an individual confrere to guide the next phase of the process, namely, the further gathering of materials. For the time being at least, the commission limited itself to the Liturgy of the Hours, morning and evening prayer, although obviously some of the materials gathered could also serve as food for meditation. The commission members requested materials in the following areas:

- a. Vincentian hymns or songs. These would either be about Vincent, Louise, etc. or in the Vincentian spirit.
- b. Scripture texts (psalms, Gospel passages, etc.) which reflect Vincentian concerns or spirit.
- c. Vincentian texts, e.g., quotes from Vincent, Louise, etc., which could be used as readings in morning or evening prayer.
- d. Vincentian prayers: traditional or contemporary, universal or particular, which could also be used to enhance our morning and evening prayer.
- e. Some examples or "models" of actual celebrations of morning and evening prayer which have been good experiences for the confreres and which they think might help enrich the prayer of the Congregation.

The commission invited the confreres to create anew or pick out the best of already available materials. Again a good number responded. From materials provided by the confreres, a provisional "Vincentian Book of Prayer" or "Resource Book" of texts, prayers, hymns, and sample celebrations has been put together in English. The format of an attractive spring binder was deliberately chosen to allow great flexibility. The confreres should feel free to add, to replace, to rearrange the content. This is ***not*** an "***editio typica***" to be translated or followed slavishly. It is simply a sample or model of what you can do in your own language and culture. It is also not intended to replace the Church's Liturgy of the Hours which remains the framework in which we generally pray. It is rather to provide another, more specifically Vincentian, option which on occasion, e.g., once a week, you might use.

As the Superior General points out in his Introduction, when celebrations of morning and evening prayer like those in this book are used, a confrere can consider them as substituting for the breviary's version of lauds and vespers of that day. Insofar as a dispensation or commutation is necessary in this regard, the Superior General is happy to grant it.

The General is asking each province (or group of provinces) to develop something similar to this resource book adapted to its own language and culture. For this purpose, the

appointment of a commission in each province or area will be necessary. If there are hymns, prayers, celebrations, readings, etc. in the resource book that the members of the commission or the confreres of the province do not like, they can simply be discarded, but others should be substituted that are more fitting for your own cultural setting.

Then **your** version of a resource book should be used in your houses experimentally for one year. The General asks each house to use it at least once a week.

After a year, each province or group of provinces should evaluate the use of their own book, making suggestions for improvement. These evaluations and a sample of the resource book from that particular culture should be sent to the Secretary General, who will send you a reminder at the appropriate time.

After receiving the evaluations and samples from the various provinces and regions, the Commission on Prayer will make recommendations to the Superior General and the members of the General Council about the next step to be taken.

Finally, the goal of the Superior General's efforts and those of the commission on prayer is not a book, in any form. That is only an instrument. The goal continues to be to intensify and renew the prayer life of our community in light of our Constitutions while offering "something beautiful to God" and attractive to the young.

## **Content**

Introduction by the General and Editor's Preface.

PSALMS. The commission chose these psalms mainly because they contained "Vincentian themes," for example, God's special concern for the poor and the oppressed. The translation we have used is the recently released International Committee for English in the Liturgy (ICEL) version.

Although not yet officially approved for use in the Liturgy of the Hours, this translation has a number of qualities to recommend it for occasional use. It is an up-to-date translation based on the original Hebrew. It involves inclusive language, which a number of the confreres requested. There are also musical, chantlike settings available to go with it. The gospel canticles, the Cantic of Zechariah (*Benedictus*) and the Cantic of Mary (*Magnificat*) at the end of this section are from the same translation.

SCRIPTURE READINGS. Once again the commission chose these texts with an eye to the "Vincentian spirit." The translation is that of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. It is available on the Mac Bible computer program and this made for easier transcription. Although not yet approved for official liturgical use in the United States, it is in use in Canada, Ireland, and England.

VINCENTIAN TEXTS. The Commission selected a number of texts of St. Vincent as found in *THE WAY OF VINCENT DE PAUL* by Robert P. Maloney, C.M. Since this work has been translated into a number of languages, access to those texts is readily available. The editor has added texts from the works of different confreres. Wherever possible, we have asked the author or translator to choose texts which he considered particularly significant. At times the excerpts are longer than what might be used in a short morning or evening prayer. In that case, confreres might select a portion of the excerpt giving, as one of the authors suggested, the words of St. Vincent himself priority.

PRAYERS. Included are prayers of St. Vincent, some official liturgical prayers, prayers composed by confreres, and other prayers "in the Vincentian spirit," which were suggested by the confreres.

HYMNS AND CHANTS. We have selected music composed by members of the Vincentian family and other music which reflects Vincentian concerns. Some hymnals have an index of topics which make it easier to find hymns with Vincentian themes. We have included relatively few samples, since musical tastes are widely varied even, for example, within the English speaking provinces. Also there are samples of simple chants, for example from the Taizé community, which are attractive and easy to learn.

SAMPLE CELEBRATIONS. Selecting these samples or "models" was probably the most difficult task. The commission wished to offer only examples which had actually been celebrated. An effort was made to provide a diversity of forms.

BIBLIOGRAPHY. Although perhaps not necessary, a selection of some works related to prayer might be helpful. Much more could be done by way of bibliography. For the time being, we have limited ourselves mainly to works used in this resource book.

## **Conclusion**

As Fr. Maloney has made clear, the goal of the commission's efforts is not simply to provide a sample resource book. Perhaps that may lead to a "holy competition," as one confrere suggested, which may benefit our prayer. But it is only an instrument to help us reflect on and enhance our prayer life which is so crucial to our mission. If it does assist in some small way, then all our work will have been more than worthwhile.