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## **Vincentian Community – Community for the Mission**

*by Santiago Azcárate, C.M.  
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9.VI.2001*

Considering the concrete specification of the theme proposed to us, I will concentrate directly on the part assigned to me. Only in passing will I refer to St. Vincent following our traditions, since I suppose this will be treated adequately by different speakers.

My reflection treats of the theme “Vincentian Community, Community for the Mission.” And I have chosen as a theme text no. 19 of the Constitutions, a number which makes three basic affirmations:

The Vincentian Community is for the evangelization of the poor.

The Vincentian Community is dedicated to the preparation of apostolic activity, to encourage and help it constantly.

All must dedicate themselves, in fraternal unity, to the continual renovation of our common mission.

Community and mission appear then, in this number of our constitutions, to be intrinsically united. So, from the very beginning of the norms on community life, it is clearly recognized that Community is for the Mission.

We have really an affirmation that there can be no Christian community which is not at the same time a missionary community. The document “Fraternal Life in Community” (58) says: “As the Holy Spirit anointed the Church in the Cenacle in order to send it to evangelize the world, so every religious community, as an authentic emanation of the resurrected Lord, is by its very nature, apostolic. Community and Mission are co-penetrated and mutually involved, so much so that community represents the source, and at the same time, the fruit of the mission, community is missionary and the mission is community.

The fact is that the community itself has a missionary signification, since the mission which it has received from Christ is to realize unity among ourselves. “By this they will know that you are my disciples: if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:35). And we know very well how in the primitive Church it was the fraternal testimony of the community that advanced the faith, so much so that Acts usually takes for granted a direct relation between the unity of the first Christians and the arrival of new believers (Acts: 2:44-47; 4:32-33; 5:12-14). So

we have a reciprocity between community and mission: community is for the mission, and mission creates community.

## **1. Community and Mission in our Vincentian roots**

All this is clearly seen in the very beginnings of our Vincentian community. Our Company was born as an apostolic group. The mission to the poor country people brought about the union of the first priests with Vincent De Paul, so that the contract of 17 April 1625 stresses clearly the primary apostolic character of the community (It will dedicate itself entirely and exclusively to the salvation of the poor, going from village to village... They will live in common under obedience to M. de Paul... they will be obliged to go every five years to all the lands of the founders...). After Folleville, experience which originated this movement, the mission proved to be too much for only one person, which made it necessary to recruit more priests for the mission. It was this mission that resulted in the forming of a society of priests in apostolic community.

We are not, nevertheless, faced with a community merely instrumental in serving one task, but with a group which, following the example of Christ, Evangelizer of the poor, in the company of his disciples, comes together for mission and to show, both by apostolic labor and its style of life, that God loves the poor. In this sense we cannot forget that the Mission is directed more to a constituted body than to persons.

The Mission is confided to the Congregation (C. 19), and then, through it, to the confreres. Apostolic life and community life cannot be separated.

We speak, furthermore, of community for the mission because that was the vision of the life of Christ, evangelization of the poor as a sign of the arrival of the Kingdom, that which defines and gives theological life to the Vincentian community; being the common missionary perspective that stimulates personal evangelical ardor, common life, and apostolic service.

## **2. Elements of a Vincentian community for the Mission**

Since we have not been asked for a conference, but just a presentation of a theme, we are not interested in theorizing on the mutual implications between community and mission, but in presenting some of the elements which must be kept in mind today in defining the missionary character of our community. So I offer the following points:

### **a) A living and committed consciousness of the present moment**

A missionary community cannot take refuge in nostalgia for the past nor get lost in dreams of the future.

A missionary community must be very conscious of the reality in which it lives, which implies knowing it, studying it, and living it. The society which shelters us is very different today than that in which the majority grew up; it is a society in continual process of change, pluralist, secular, globalized, with serious social problems all of which decisively influence the way we understand and live community life. Which makes it necessary that we form a consciousness of our situation, and get used to distinguishing, since he who does not distinguish, confuses. And sometimes we confuse too many things: evangelical poverty with economy, unity with uniformity, fidelity with custom, peace with order, obedience with submission, contemplation with evasion, being united with being together, apostolic zeal with activism, praying with prayers, personality with individualism, sincerity with spontaneity, prudence with cowardice, authority with authoritarianism, understanding with permissiveness, responsibility with worry, liberty with independence, autonomy with disinterestedness. And it is not the same thing to look at the constitution of a missionary community from one or the other of these opposites. How do we overcome this confusion?

By perceiving the magnitude of present changes, not being affected by them, and facing them seriously:

- Placing ourselves at the root of community missionary life which is Christ-Evangelizer. And from there
- Looking at the present world with reality and hope. And from there locating the Community.

#### **b) Well-defined faith and charismatic identity**

Surrounded by a society in which conversation about faith is generally accepted, and in which the very environment accepts optional beliefs, we carry out our missionary ministry in an atmosphere of indifference abounding in opposing religious offerings. This results in a personal faith which deepens the experience of God and discovers in Christ the vital reason for existence. It brings about a kind of community which facilitates that religious experience by means of an encounter with Christ in prayer as well as an encounter with one's brother. Without a radically experienced faith, personally assumed and maturely affirmed, a missionary community life today is impossible.

On the other hand, considering the conformity of communities continually more heterogeneous in relation to ministries (each house dedicated to parish, prison, hospital, education), achieving a well-defined charismatic identity is necessary. If the greater number of projects reach the missioner from outside the

community and the necessary stimuli are also found outside, it is necessary that the spirit of identity and belonging be cultivated diligently in order to avoid dispersion and other loyalties. We cannot offer true service to the Church and to the poor if we dilute our spirit with a generic reference to the Gospel, or with characteristics which are not really ours.

**c) Community more charismatic than institutional**

A Vincentian missionary community cannot be trapped in institutional customs which arose in the past, but must be supported by the charism of continually designing its presence and redefining its strategies. It cannot be taken for granted that we can continue doing the same things, changing only their forms. Nor can we attempt at any cost to hang on to long established works even at the risk of destroying many of our companions. The important question must not be: How do we keep inherited structures or known institutional customs? But: How to witness to Jesus today? How to strengthen here and now the following of Christ the Evangelizer of the poor? The important thing for a missionary community is to visualize its specific identity, continually renewing the adequate method of making Christ present to the poor. And this implies trusting more in the spirit than in the organization, to worry about fidelity to a charism more than about regular observance of an established order, stressing more spiritual dynamics than practical means. This should result in a constant discernment in the Lord. To speak of community for the mission is the same as speaking of community in discernment, since without apostolic discernment of the mission there are no evangelical guarantees of learning or realizing the will of God. The entire community is called on to discover what the Lord desires. This presupposed searching for the will of God from his, not my, viewpoint; seeking to have works, not just motives, to listen to the spiritual perception of each and every member; to try to maintain the unity of the group in the process of discernment as well as in carrying it out. This discernment in common is exactly what simplifies the overcoming of that often perceived tension between community and fidelity to the mission. In community we seek the will of God, and that is found in the mission. And it is the community that is available for mission, and it is mission which forms the community.

**d) Possessed of a participative, co-responsible structure of communication**

Called to “prepare, encourage, and constantly help apostolic activity,” the Vincentian community must seek the contributions of all to the common mission. It is absolutely necessary, in this sense, to create an authentic conscience that our mission is unique, that it belongs to the community and needs the cooperation of all. Stagnant activities, individual works margined from the community, are not worthwhile if there is no mission confided to the community which is based on

personal aptitudes and which is committed to all in an attitude of co-responsibility and participation. This calls many of us to a change of mentality and comportment. It calls us to adopt a real ecclesiology of communion, to be always open to dialogue and communication. This implies a lot of openness, information, intimacy, mutual help, interchange, sharing of responsibilities, authentic participation of all in the decision-making process. A mission cannot belong to all if one person monopolizes responsibility and treats his companions in an infantile manner. You cannot talk of missionary community if there is no mature participation of all in the realization of the mission. It is necessary then to arouse the interest of all in the tasks of the community, to share responsibilities, define means of participation in planning and the realization of common missionary life and facilitating communication and dialogue. All this must be done for the community's creation of a well-defined project. A project which begins by divining the will of God for the group; a project which places the community in an attitude of mission through a shared vocation and an analysis of reality; a project which is carried out and continually evaluated more from a missionary sense which animates, than from the practical materialization of its content. And how it is done is more important than what is done; so the necessity of seeking a lifestyle less installed and more agile, less conformable and more sober, less routine and more imaginative, less secure and more committed.

#### **e) Open community**

The importance of every believer in the life of the Church, as a principal reason, and in many cases the weakness of our human resources necessitate the creation of some open communities. Today the exclusive responsibility for the mission cannot fall to some members, neither by ecclesiology, nor reality.

Today the collaboration of all is necessary to carry the community commitment forward. This implies open communities which know how to enrich themselves through the contributions of others; open communities capable of shared prayer, coming together, working and living with other Christians who agree with our charism. The possibilities opened by the Superior General in associating groups and persons to the Congregation of the Mission should be taken advantage of in order to give more vigor to our communities and greater consistency to our mission. All this clearly demands a non-sacralized style of life.

At the same time openness means being available for collaboration with the laity in their missionary activity. Today all are responsible for the life and mission of the Church. The document (*Fraternal Life in Community*; 70) Fraternal life is an example of ecclesial communion, and at the same time directs our apostolic energies to evangelize the world. The document adds "Collaboration and interchange as gifts become more intense when groups of

laity participate by vocation, and as far as possible within one spiritual family, in the charism and mission of the institute.” In this context, we are lucky to have the Vincentian Family to cooperate in evangelizing the poor. The convictions and commitments of our last General Assembly are well oriented toward this cooperation. A principal objective of each community must be, then, to seek in the groups of the Vincentian Family a commitment to our common mission.

#### **f) Insertions with the poor**

Since evangelization of the poor was the determining factor at the origin of our Company, so evangelization of the poor must determine all community activity. In the oft quoted document, # 63 speaks of “communities of insertion,” which are expressions of the preferential option for and solidarity with the poor, accompanying them in a process of integral liberation, and which are also the fruits of a desire to discover Christ, a poor Christ in my marginalized brother in order to serve and identify Christ in him. This option for the poor is not preferential for us, but exclusive; so our Vincentian communities must seek the greatest possible insertion with the poor in order to make present to them in a clearer way the love of Christ which redeems and liberates.

This presupposes three concrete challenges: presence, solidarity and creativity. Presence: because our specific place, like Christ’s, is with the poor. God calls the Vincentian community where the poor live, which means constantly relocating our communities and rethinking the thoughts of those who are not poor. Solidarity: putting means and personnel at the service of the poor, opening ourselves to cooperation with other groups. All this following the example of Christ who desired, penetrated with, not on the path of power, but of service. Creativity: to make effective the gospel in work (one’s own experience) and deeds (changing reality). Creativity does not mean spontaneity, nor breaking with the past, nor making speedy decisions. Creativity presupposes preparation, a capacity to support individuals and communities with adequate, specific formation, vocationally committed, and a decided institutional support.

Since our Vincentian community began for the reevangelization of the poor, it is precisely this insertion among the poor that determines the erection of a community as well as its internal dynamism.

#### **g) Gifted with the authority to animate and serve**

The figure of the superior is important in the Vincentian community, a figure which used to determine to a great extent community life. If today we want to accentuate the missionary character of the Vincentian community, we cannot follow the line of order, timetable, and discipline, but rather the way of openness, collaboration with the laity, insertion with the poor, or

corresponsibility. We must understand the function of the superior in animation and service. The truth is that all evangelical authority emanated from Mark 10: "The Son of Man did not come to be serve, but to serve." So that in a community understood as a union of brothers in the same vocation, for the same mission, authority cannot be superior, nor director, nor coordinator, nor ruler, but the animator of one spirit and one mission.

This implies a participative frame of mind which encourages relationships among brothers, shares leadership, stimulates corresponsibility. It leads to options for creativity, openness to mission, designing of procedures, planning and projects. It requires attitudes of love of Christ and the poor, of humility and service, of generosity and witness.

And all this thought over, analyzed, and projected toward mission. Authority is at the service of the community. Community is at the service of the mission. Authority, therefore, must focus all on the service of community animation in view of the mission. Although circumstances, cultures, times, personnel change, the mission continues as always: evangelization of the poor. So he who has authority must encourage newness and change, creativity and presence among the poor.

### **3. Actuality and vigor of the Vincentian Community for the Mission**

We must accept seriously this capacity of the Vincentian community for the good of the poor whom we wish to evangelize and also for attracting the potential in today's youth. These often fear a definitive commitment, perceiving the Church as irrelevant, criticizing its moral as obsolete and as not aware of their commitment to the grave problems with poverty, ?, ecology, drugs. But it is also true that many of them seek suggested projects, very demanding, which reinforce the internal cohesion of a group committed to the great causes of humanity, capable of making sense out of life.

It seems true that predisposition to prolonged options has diminished. But has predisposition to projects of interior transformation diminished? Probably not. What has happened is that many competitions to the classic vocation (priestly and religious) have arisen; "lay missionaries," social workers, psychologists, physicians, part-time teachers. And in this "open market" of salvation the "law of supply and demand" rules: much supply, little demand. And, above all, the "law of product quality" rules: the offer of best quality wins over the consumer.

Is it not here then, that our project fits? Jesus as model and evangelization of the poor as "profession"? Our Vincentian spirit is a spirit of service of the poor: a spirit, therefore, of solidarity, fraternity, and equality of life, a present-

day spirit. Let us take refuge then in what constitutes our identity. Is there any project more daring than the gospel? More radical than that of Christ? Is there a spirit more of the present-day than that of St. Vincent? So we see that our project is daring, radical, and present-day because our identity is evangelical, Christian and Vincentian. Let us live vigorously what we are by vocation and we will possess an offer of quality and a serious project for those who do not want to live in vain.

(JOHN KENNEDY, C.M., translator)