

*E*choes *of the Company*



Spiritual Life - Challenges - News - History

MAY

JUNE

2012

No. 3

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Spiritual life

An Undivided Heart; Prayer and Praise.....	170
Father Patrick Griffin, CM, Director General	
Spiritual Accompaniment.....	182
Seminarium, May 2011	
Father Gabriel Naranjo, CM	
Letter of June 3, 2012.....	205
To all the members of the Vincentian Family	
Father Gregory Gay, CM, Superior General	
Union and Collaboration in Saint Vincent.....	209
Some Reflections on our Collaboration within the Vincentian Family	
Father Eli Chaves Dos Santos, CM	

News from the Provinces

Visit by Superiors

Visit Made by Mother Evelyne Franc and Sister Rosa.....	220
María Miró, Assistant General, to the Community of Bebalem in Chad.	
The Sisters of the Community	

Sisters' Testimonies

Province of Bogotá.....	224
CIEVI, Ongoing Formation Session for Latin America and the Caribbean	
Some Participants in the Session	

History of the Company

Sources and Updates

The Spirituality of Saint Vincent.....	226
Part 1	
-Imitating Jesus Christ	
-Evangelization	
(to be continued)	
Father Jean Morin, CM	

International Meeting of the Visitatrixes, May 2012



An Undivided Heart: Prayer and Praise

Spiritual Life

As we consider what an “undivided heart” means for the consecrated person, we can begin by reflecting on their call to be people of prayer. We bring all that we are to this effort of seeking intimacy with the divine presence. Our *Inter Assemblies Document* reminds us that a Daughter of Charity is: “*thirsting to be more rooted in Christ, to enter into an intimate relationship with him*” (IAD, p. 4).

The Scottish and Irish mystics sometimes use a description for a holy place which I like very much. They call it a “thin place,” a transparent place where God comes very close. This expression arises from the belief that in some areas and during some times of the year, the distance between heaven and earth shrinks and these two realms draw closer together. The veil that separates one world from the next becomes so thin that it reveals something of heaven.

Sometimes this may happen during a particular experience of nature where one becomes so overwhelmed by beauty and peacefulness that a glimpse of the divine is granted. Sometimes it may happen when listening to a special piece of music or poetry or theatre at a unique time and in a unique place, and one senses something

greater than oneself. There are times and places and events which may enable us to experience these types of “thin” places. For me, a sacred experience of a genuine “thin place” can happen through a person. We often draw closer to God through someone else, perhaps it is a child or a genuinely good person or someone who is caught up in a critical situation or someone who is poor. In these thin places, we can sense our undivided heart: the part of us which is connected to the created order senses a greater awareness of the part of us which longs for its completion in God. St. Augustine famously exclaimed, “My heart is restless, O Lord, until it rests in thee.”

Particular types of experiences are felt as thin places. These are holy times when we are blessed; we feel the reverence of the moment.

Death is a thin place. Some years ago, I was called to the hospital and the bedside of a man I had known for much of my life. His wife was there with me. Sometimes my friend would speak to his wife and me as clearly as can be, and sometimes he would speak to her mother and my mother and his brother with seemingly equal lucidity. Of course, these last three had all been dead for some time. The nurse told us that he was hallucinating. I was not so sure. He was not speaking to flying kangaroos but real people. Death and dying is a thin place where this world and the next draw closer. It does not seem unreasonable to me that someone could have one foot in each of these thin places. This, of course, makes it a holy time. Have you had a similar experience?

The Eucharist is a thin place. In the Eucharist, heaven and earth draw close together. We are offered an opportunity to listen to God’s word addressed to us. We can hear the way Jesus is teaching us and calling us to faithful living. In the Eucharist, we are invited to eat of the bread of the altar which is the body and blood of Christ made present among us in this special gathering and celebration. It is a sharing in the heavenly banquet and God is present to us. Our *Constitutions* remind us of the vital importance of the Eucharist which is “the center of [our] life and mission and an indispensable meeting each day with Christ and [our] brothers and sisters” (C. 19b). The author of the Letter to the Hebrews makes a particularly striking comment. He says: “We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.” (Heb 12:1)

When we gather for the Eucharistic celebration, we are surrounded by the hosts of heaven and all those who have gone before us to this great feast of our faith. It is a thin place in which we share the Good News of the Gospel and the bread of heaven with the vast community of all those who have gone before us as well as those who are gathered with us. This celebration is a holy time when God becomes very close

And prayer is also a time when God comes very close. That seems really obvious. The first thing we do when we pray is to recognize the one to whom we are praying. **We place ourselves in the presence of God.** That means that we are aware of the One to whom we are speaking. We are in a place where God is near. Prayer is important in our lives; it is part of our vocation as consecrated persons and we have to be constantly deepening it. Our undivided hearts call us to this way of expressing our closeness to our God.

Today, let us focus our attention on that particular aspect of prayer which is a continual and deepened awareness of the One to whom we are praying. As we continually remember God our hearts become centered on Him and open to other aspects of prayer. Scripture gives us several examples of this.

I. MOSES AND THE BURNING BUSH

The story of Moses and the burning bush is one of the key stories in the Old Testament. Moses is tending his father-in-law's flock when he sees a bush that is on fire but not burnt up. As he draws nearer, he hears a voice which commands him to remove his sandals because the ground where he is standing is holy. He obeys and finds himself in the presence of the God of his ancestors. This God wants to send him to deliver the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. Moses asks that most important of questions: "If they ask who sent me, what shall I tell them?" And Moses is told the divine name represented by the four letters: Y-H-W-H.

This name means "the one who is present" because that is characteristic of the God of Israel. Whenever the people cry out, God will hear and respond and be present. This God will be present with them always.

The people of Israel, then, symbolize this presence in their wandering in the desert and, ultimately, in their Temple of Jerusalem, by the Ark of the Covenant which represents the holy presence of God among His people.

The holiness of the divine name cannot be exaggerated. When this name is pronounced God becomes present. We know that Pope Benedict (2008) asked the Christian community to stop speaking this name aloud in the liturgy. This follows the practice of the Jewish community. Speaking the holy, divine name of God aloud would be to make it commonplace. We can understand what holiness means in this context: it refers exclusively to God and renders Him present.

When we come before the Lord and speak this holy name, we are on holy ground. This is how Moses experienced it. What makes the ground "holy" is not that particular patch of ground but the fact that it is where one encounters the Lord. Each place where we encounter God is made holy by God's presence. It is a thin place. So, our chapels become holy ground, as are our local communities, "the primary place of belonging for the Daughters of Charity" (C. 34), but also our apostolates where we encounter God in the presence of those who are poor and in need of our care. Our schools and hospitals are holy, our offices and soup kitchens are holy, our streets and the homes of our people are holy. Places where we find God present in the midst of His people are holy and elicit from us a response of reverence and respect—removing our shoes, speaking with humility, allowing ourselves to be taught. Holy ground is the place where we open ourselves to God's presence, and allow God to touch our lives, and hear the call to more faithful discipleship. These are thin places. These are places where we are invited to open our undivided heart as we recognize the One to whom we are speaking.

Louise offers some thoughts on this matter as she writes to one of her Daughters (and to us): "*Oh, how true it is that souls who seek God will find Him everywhere but especially in the poor! How I cherish your thoughts on this subject! They gave me great cause to praise God.*" (Spiritual Writings, L. 292. p. 431)

2. MARY MAGDALEN AND JESUS IN THE GARDEN

One of my favorite stories about a thin place in the Scriptures is that of Mary Magdalen in the garden after the death of Jesus:

“Mary stayed outside the tomb weeping. Then, still weeping, she stooped to look inside and saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head, the other at the feet. And they said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’ ‘They have taken my Lord away’ she replied, ‘and I don’t know where they have put him.’ As she said this she turned round and saw Jesus standing there though she did not recognize him. Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?’ She thought it was the gardener and said to him, ‘Sir, if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and remove him.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She knew him then and said to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabboni,’ which means Master. Jesus said to her, ‘Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go and find my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’ So Mary of Magdala went and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord and that he had said these things to her.”(John 20:11-18)

Mary Magdalen finds herself in the presence of Jesus, someone whom she had known and loved for years, but she does not recognize him. She is in a thin place and unaware of the special presence of God at this moment. She is weeping and searching for the Lord; she asks angels and even Jesus himself where the body of Jesus has been taken. Can you smile at the gentle humor of the scene, especially when Mary asks the resurrected Lord if he has taken away the body of Jesus—which, of course, he has. She is so focused on her own story and expectations that she does not recognize the Lord when he is literally in front of her. This story should sound familiar to us—encouragingly so.

Jesus asks the key question: “Who are you looking for?” She has, of course, been looking for a thing, for the corpse of Jesus. He invites her to the more important search for a person. She should be looking not for the inanimate presence of Jesus but for his living and breathing and accompanying presence which is directly in front of her. When he

finally speaks her name, she recognizes him. Where before she had been searching with her eyes as she looked for what she expected to see, she now is invited to search with her undivided heart and recognize Jesus. And she does. Jesus then tells her to stop holding on to him. This probably means more than trying to hold on to his resurrected body which stands in front of her. It is an invitation to let go of her expectations and current desires. She must let Jesus be Lord and lead her in new directions. He will not be present to her as he had been, and she needs to open her eyes and her heart to a new possibility. Jesus is now present in a new way.

The key to this encounter for me is Jesus inviting Mary to ask herself who she is seeking —“who are you looking for?” As long as she keeps in her mind her own idea of what to expect, she cannot see Jesus. But as soon as she allows herself to be called personally and to respond personally to the Lord, she can see the One to whom she is speaking and this experience brings God very close.

Our prayer should also begin by asking ourselves who we are looking for. When we approach prayer with our own expectations and image of who the Lord is, and how the Lord needs to be present, and how the Lord will respond in a particular situation, then we have cut ourselves off from the resurrected Lord who wants to stop our tears and open our eyes. We have been building our own place of encounter with the Lord, rather than finding the way he is present. The Lord calls us by name and shows us the obligations that follow on from that call. If we respond with undivided hearts which allow the Lord to be Lord we will engage in genuine conversation which is prayer. But we need to know with whom we are speaking and how he is present.

3 PAUL AND THE EXPERIENCE OF CONVERSION

One of the most well-known events in the early Christian community is the story of the conversion of St. Paul. It is told three times in the Acts of the Apostles:

Now Saul, still breathing murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, that, if he should find any men or women who belonged

An Undivided Heart; Prayer and Praise

to the Way, he might bring them back to Jerusalem in chains. On his journey, as he was nearing Damascus, a light from the sky suddenly flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" He said, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do." The men who were travelling with him stood speechless, for they heard the voice but could see no one. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him to Damascus. For three days he was unable to see, and he neither ate nor drank. (Acts 9:1-9)

Having given his approval and support to the execution of Christian heretics, Saul, who was both aggressive and pious, is on his way to persecute the nascent Christian community, when he is knocked to the ground and then, like Moses and Mary Magdalen, called by name. Little does he know that he has been knocked into a thin place. Once again, the question is raised about who is summoning the disciple—just as had happened with Moses and Mary Magdalen. Paul asks "Who are you, sir?" He is told that it is Jesus whom Paul has been persecuting in the persons of the Christian community. Paul's life is changed in this one encounter and we learn something important from it.

Paul, who had been so violently angry with the Christian community that he was willing to bring them suffering and death, now becomes one who will not bring suffering into the lives of others; he becomes someone who is willing to undergo suffering and death himself in the name of Jesus and for the sake of the Gospel. This road to Damascus was a place where God became close for Paul. He met the Lord God whom he had sought and worshipped all his life. This encounter takes place in Jesus. Paul recognizes who Jesus is and who Jesus will need to be for him. His heart becomes undivided. Now it will be totally fixed upon Jesus and the service of his name and the proclamation of his Gospel. The secret is that Paul **came to know the One he was speaking to** in this conversation—this prayer—on the road to Damascus.

Our experience of conversion does not have to be the same as Paul's,

but we are invited to learn from his experience. His concept of the God of Israel, who was the Father of Jesus, was not a correct one. Paul needed to change his idea of who God is and how God chooses to act. He had to abandon his prejudices, change his way of thinking about God and the way He acts. He has to learn more about listening than speaking; and practice non-violence.

I marvel when I think of Paul and St. Vincent and their conversion experience. While Paul's experience is spectacular and unique, Vincent's experience is down to earth since it takes place within the context of his own ministry. Yet both of them change their lives. Paul meets Christ in His resurrected body on the road to Damascus, and Vincent meets Him in the afflicted bodies of those who are poor. Both then grow in their appreciation of how they will encounter Jesus throughout their lives. They open their eyes to the different places where God comes close to us and respond with undivided hearts.

4 OUR PRAYER AND PRAISE

To continue our reflection on prayer, we need to constantly go back to three points, with special emphasis on the first.

a) Who are we speaking to?

The starting point has to be an awareness of the One to whom we are speaking. A conversation with a stranger never has the same intimacy or content as one with someone whom we know. When we come to prayer, we must first of all place ourselves in the presence of God, conscious of who He is for us. That may take different forms for each of us at different times, but thinking about the maker of the universe, God's indwelling presence, the crucified Saviour, all give focus to our prayer; they evoke from us an attitude of praise and thanks for all the Lord has done and continues to do. We can only marvel and wonder at God's greatness and the way God is present to us. Our prayer must allow us to identify the One to whom we are speaking.

In his teaching on prayer, Saint Vincent insists on the need to be attentive to the presence of God.

An Undivided Heart; Prayer and Praise

“So now, this is what we have to do; first of all, place ourselves in the presence of God, considering Him either as He is in heaven, seated on the throne of His majesty, from where He looks on us and contemplates all things; or in His immensity, present everywhere, here and elsewhere, in the highest heavens and in the lowest part of the abyss, reading our hearts and penetrating even the most secret folds of our conscience; or in His presence in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar: ‘O Savior, here I am, a weak and miserable sinner; here I am at the foot of the altars on which you repose; O Savior may I do nothing unworthy of this holy presence;’ or, lastly, within ourselves, pervading us entirely and dwelling in the depth of our hearts.” (CCD XI, Conference 168, p. 359).

Vincent highlights different ways in which God manifests Himself; His divine majesty; His presence in the created order; His presence in the sacrament of the altar; and His indwelling in us. The Lord is always present to us and in myriad ways; to acknowledge that presence is to start on the prayer journey. In fact, we cannot help but pray when we recognize God with us in these places where He comes close to us.

b) The One who speaks to us personally:

In each of the encounters which we have been considering, the Lord addresses the individual personally and at a particular moment in their life;—the persecution of Israel for Moses, the grief of Mary, the anger of Paul:

“Moses! Moses! ... Come no nearer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground; ... I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry of complaint ...” (Exodus 3:4-5, 7)

“Mary! ... Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.” (John 20:16-17)

“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? ... I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” (Acts 9:4-5)

We, too, need to hear the Lord speaking to us personally. He calls our name and invites us to speak to him as his beloved children. The Good Shepherd knows his sheep, and they know him. We are asked to recognize the One to whom we are speaking, and to recognize that we are known by God personally. This realization should give intimacy and ease to our prayer as we are invited into a place where God comes close and invites us to intimacy with Him. It gives consolation and resolution to our undivided heart.

c) The One who gives us a task to do.

Each person to whom the Lord speaks is given a task to do.

“[Moses] Come, now! I will send you to Pharaoh to lead my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt..” (Exodus 3:10)

“[Mary] Go to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’.” (John 20:17)

“[Saul] Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do.” (Acts 9:6)

The Lord has a task for each of us; we are commissioned and strengthened for that task as we respond to the Lord’s guidance which we come to know in our prayer. Louise has something to say to us about this:

“Finally, my dear Sisters, if you place yourself often in the presence of God, His goodness will not fail to advise you on all that He asks of you, whether it be the mortification of your senses and passions or the practice of the virtues which he desires so that you may be pleasing to him.” (Spiritual Writings, L. 193. pp. 218-219)

In another place, she makes the unusual and, (for me) humorous remark:

“Our Lord knows very well where to find you when He has more for you to do.” (Spiritual Writings. L. 578. p. 605)

An Undivided Heart; Prayer and Praise

Placing oneself in the presence of God and then listening to what the Lord has to say to us is a blessing of the “thin” place. The document *Vita Consecrata* also teaches us about this and gives us a wonderful description of the truly undivided heart:

“If any of God’s children were to know and taste divine love, the uncreated God, the incarnate God, the God who endured suffering, the God who is the supreme good, they would give themselves completely to him, they would withdraw not only from other creatures but even from their very selves, and with all their being would love this God of love . . .” (VC 104)

CONCLUSION

Prayer means being aware of these three things.

A person:

In our prayer we must be attentive to the God to whom we are speaking. Reflecting on who God is for us is a blessing and a good starting point. It leads to a prayer of praise.

A place:

An encounter with God is experienced in a place where God comes close to us. We can focus our attention on the special place where we meet the Lord. It is a holy place and we are invited to recognize it as such. Can we identify these places in our life?

An undivided heart

Genuine prayer flows from an interior disposition which makes God the center of our lives and the one thing necessary for us. Everything else is subordinate to Him. This is the special treasure of the consecrated person.

Basically our prayer brings us to a place where God is close; for the undivided heart is in natural communication with the One who loves us and yearns for our love. Our *Constitutions* speak beautifully about the nature of our prayer: “*A highlight of their day [for a Daughter of Charity] is the time of personal prayer: listening to the Lord,*

praise and thanksgiving, contemplation, seeking to know His will, and presenting to Him the life and needs of those who are poor.” (C. 21b) We are invited to get to know the Lord intimately even as we allow ourselves to be known, and we take up the task of serving the Lord in our brothers and sisters. Part of the service which we render is our heartfelt prayer, and this is, for us, a “labor of love.” Today let us take for our reflection the liturgical invitation: “Let us pray.”

Father Patrick GRIFFIN, CM
Director General

Seminarium May 2011

Spiritual Accompaniment

The Constitutions do not hesitate to identify spiritual accompaniment with spiritual direction.¹ This important formative dynamic must go beyond an accompaniment which is respectful to such a degree that it has no influence on the person being directed, although direction which neither violates personal freedom nor replaces the action of the directee, encourages development of the individual. In the Company it is considered to be an “efficacious means”, if not to say an indispensable one, with a twofold objective: the following of Christ and living the Vincentian vocation. And so spiritual accompaniment should be offered only by those who know the spirit of the Company and who are capable of providing it, preferably a member of the Congregation of the Mission or of the Community.

On the other hand, this synthesis which is profound in content, practical in its requirements and full of common sense, isn’t located in the articles of the Constitutions that specifically deal with formation, but in Chapter III, “Life of the Daughters of Charity,” section two, “Relationship with God.” This means that spiritual accompaniment has more to do with *being* than *doing*, and is not only for the time of *formation specifically*, but should be *continuous*, for all of one’s life.

In the context of this Seminarium, we need to speak of spiritual accompaniment as a fundamental element of formation, not only in relation to the implications of evangelical discernment, but also with regard to the deepest level of rootedness in the experience of God, in its missionary thrust in the service of those who are poor, in living the

evangelical counsels, and in sisterly life in community.²

This spiritual accompaniment aims at personalizing someone’s life, her choices and decisions, experiences and difficulties, all that has happened in her individual life, so that she may be formed into an adult, develop all her possibilities and accept and overcome her limitations and deficiencies as much as possible. Spiritual accompaniment aims at achieving progressive integration of the structure of one’s individual personality with the ideals that one is aiming for.

We speak of spiritual accompaniment in the formation of young Sisters, but as ongoing for the formators, because in reality it is necessary and indispensable to accompany and be accompanied. In the last analysis, formation is a process that lasts all one’s life and touches the whole of the person: her life, interior world, relationships, her maturity, and her holiness. Spiritual accompaniment must extend to every aspect of her being and doing.

I’m now going to develop this theme according to the following points: an existential overview of spiritual accompaniment, its pedagogy, its relationship to prayer and the support it gives in living the evangelical counsels.

I - EXISTENTIAL OVERVIEW OF SPIRITUAL ACCOMPANIMENT

The relationship among the family, community, society, formation context and the holistic development of the individual means we have to look at the sociocultural background of spiritual accompaniment.

How can we communicate the reality of the world in which we live? Neil Armstrong’s words when he stepped on the moon express this very well: “That’s one small step for a man, one giant step for mankind.” Taking inspiration from the first astronaut who set foot on the moon, we can sum it up by saying that the reality of the world is taking a step.

2. Cf Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, Constitutions and Statutes.

1. C 20b

Spiritual Accompaniment

Yes, we take a step, but a step that is so transcendent that it has rightly been said that we are not so much in an era of change, as in a change of eras.

We could explain this step as a change of sensitivity in men and women of our times, that deals with their values and that defines their mentality. This step is taken on three levels which are closely related to each other:

- from sensitivity to the past in favor of sensitivity to the future;
- from sensitivity to orthodoxy (correct thinking) to sensitivity to orthopraxis (right doing);
- from sensitivity to the truth to sensitivity to meaning: day to day things are not valued for what they are but for what they mean.

This movement brings into play basic values which, if they are not combined lead to true disaster for humanity:

- sensitivity to the past brings out the value of fidelity, while sensitivity for the future emphasizes the value of newness;
- sensitivity to [right thinking] orthodoxy brings the value of contemplation, while sensitivity to [doing right] orthopraxis brings out the value of action.
- sensitivity to the truth leads to the value of objectivity, while sensitivity to meaning leads to subjectivity.

This new mindset produces a certain existential context that gradually comes to be a *way of living* for countries and for entire continents. We will just mention some of its features:

- a) We live in a broken society that rejects deep convictions and reasons for living, but at the same time needs to understand why it exists, has relationships and socializes.
- b) Today, life is lived on the periphery, on the margins of being. And so, people depend too much on circumstances, and they value appearances. The restless character of our times accustoms us to a fast-paced life, a hectic way of living: the urgencies of today are ours, and these lead us, though unconsciously, to fill ourselves with “things to do”, in order to show to ourselves and others that we are important

for what we do and to believe that we are valuable more for what we do or how we stand out than for what we are.

c) The western world, especially, has accentuated the meaning of experimenting that requires proof as the basis of knowledge and as the measure of efficacy. On the other hand, the immediate satisfaction of our desires is something we look for. We try to be happy in seeking pleasures which even though innocent, are always selfish. And so we have to have the best, and not lack anything for our personal comfort. We take lots of courses but we don't interiorize or integrate them into our personal life.

d) People have progressively become less sensitive in all senses of the word. They do not feel as deeply as before and their capacity for wonder is greatly impaired. We assume that we live open to the action of the Spirit and are sure that the Jesus Christ is the reason for our life, but we are still blind to recognizing that our heart is closed, or we fall into the trap of creating a way of following the Master according to our own ideas.

e) One of the most immediate consequences of these phenomena is the almost uncontrollable tendency to forget, something that goes with a decrease in our capacity for perception.

f) We have an overabundance of superficial models that we identify with, such as celebrities, while we lack true models in the interior of our families and communities. They either don't exist or we don't see them.

g) At this time in history, a time of uncontrollable novelty, the world tries to walk on the edges of all references to faith, above all those that are institutional, with the additional problem that the Church itself seems to be in crisis and to be losing to a great extent, not so much its truth, as its meaning.

h) On the other hand, the sense of God with which our people are shaped has in recent times been replaced by the sense of man, replacing God in the name of affirming the human being.

Spiritual Accompaniment

i) The theo-centeredness of our people which has been replaced by the anthropocentrism of our societies, has exchanged human autonomy for divine authority, and charity for justice. So we can observe a loss of space for God, which is translated into a secularized or secularist world, if not into an atheistic, at least godless one.

On the other hand, human history is being determined now by novelty like never before; never before has such concentrated change happened as in these present times. Some of its manifestations are:

a) The almost unlimited possibility of analysis and knowledge that has permitted science to penetrate the most intimate secret of cells and the farthest depths of the universe. We find ourselves in a humanity gifted with immense power through knowledge, but with very little wisdom.

b) Man's increased ability to alter the rhythm of nature to do things that until a little while ago couldn't even be imagined, such as genetic manipulation.

c) Discoveries in psychology that are changing traditional concepts about behavior and human responsibility.

d) A new awareness of the status of women, rights, dignity, equality, that has not been seen before in human history, and that presages unimaginable changes in the structure of societies.

e) Means of communication that transform the world into a village and condition human thinking and behavior in an uncontrollable way.

The "Aparecida" document describes this change of era as a phenomenon that is basically cultural. It underlines the importance of the subjectivism that maintains it, in some cases as cause, and in others as effect, and presents a most important implication of this: *"Therefore, all the responsibility falls on the individual to construct their own responsibility, of affirming their liberty, of having reasons for living that are no longer given by tradition as happened in the past."*³

3. DA: 57 Aparecida – Document of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops Conference, 2008

From the religious point of view, the conference recognizes the sensitivity that characterizes recent times, but with the added problem that it is "nebulous", that is, diffuse, undecipherable, difficult to locate.

Of course this paradigm shift has to do with phenomena such as globalization, the economic and techno-scientific hegemony that is neglecting the "human capital" of our people and an exercise of power that is not humanizing because of its lack of respect for human rights and scant concern for solidarity and democracy.

Faced with this worrying overview, the Church, and with her, the Company, feels at the same time, both energized and debilitated. The bishops of Aparecida recognize with humility that *"Cultural and religious pluralism of current society has repercussions in the Church. There are other sources of meaning that compete with her, relativizing and weakening their social incidence and pastoral action."*⁴

II - THE PEDAGOGY OF SPIRITUAL ACCOMPANIMENT

Spiritual accompaniment must be aware of the fragility of the world we live in and exploit to the maximum the qualities of those who are at the doors of the Company. During the period of formation accompaniment must present the basics which guarantee a faithful happy life, give cohesion to the elements of the charism, and finally, contribute to conscious and peaceful integration.

Among the many pedagogical ways of achieving this, I am going to highlight only some objectives and criteria.

A) OBJECTIVES OF ACCOMPANIMENT

a) **Good self-knowledge:** Spiritual accompaniment enables individuals to name their own experiences and manage their deficiencies in such a way that they can grow more authentically in their relationship with God. Accompaniment helps to uncover possible resistances, fears, defence mechanisms, and transferences that can lead to self-deception.

4. DA 74

Spiritual Accompaniment

b) **Interior freedom:** Spiritual accompaniment leads one to develop the capacity to love and be loved, to have faith in oneself and in God, to overcome attachments and things that enslave. Accompaniment helps to name the scars that early-life experience have left on the psyche, things that have an impact on and condition the present, the wounds that are still open.

c) **Personal faith:** Spiritual accompaniment helps to support life according to the Spirit.

d) **A plan of life** that is concrete and feasible. Spiritual accompaniment should facilitate the greatest possible personal coherence in a person's life as a path to fulfilment and response to God.

B) CRITERIA FOR ACCOMPANIMENT

a) **Cordial and attentive listening:** as we read in the dialogue of Jesus with the Samaritan woman⁵ and in the meeting with the disciples at Emmaus.⁶ The Master asks questions in order to listen, and asks questions that lead his listeners towards interiority.

b) **The capacity for wonder:** This is fundamental in all religious experience because it opens the vision and the heart to see the great variety of ways in which God attracts us and the different ways we can respond. The one who accompanies has the conviction that God works in all persons, giving them particular gifts and charisms. So he or she comes to have a genuine appreciation for the persons being directed, which leads to respect.

c) **A vision of faith:** The spiritual companion must have experience of the fatherhood⁷ of God as the foundation of her existence and of her hope. She will be able to be a witness of strength in adversity, of consolation in difficulties, of light in darkness, of confidence in the one who never abandons the work of His hands. If she lives in this way she will find it easier to listen, to admire and respect the seed of faith

5. Jn 4: 1-42

6. Lk 24: 1-35

7. Is 49: 15

that has fallen on the soil⁸, to fix her eyes on the mustard seed destined to become a tree,⁹ and to discover the mystery of the yeast that leavens the dough.¹⁰

d) **Evaluation of the meetings.** These may be at different levels of intensity and take on a different tone according to circumstances; they may be planned, occasional, requested by the companion or by the directee, or by the formation community.

III - SPIRITUAL ACCOMPANIMENT IN CHRISTIAN PRAYER

In the Constitutions, the goal of accompaniment is to help the young Sister acquire a solid spirit of prayer in order to give herself to God.

What is the secret of the identity of the Daughter of Charity? What energizes our apostolic vitality? How can a Daughter of Charity embrace the past and the future at the same time? What allows her to combine her being with her action, her life with her mission, her spiritual experience with apostolic self-giving? Prayer. St. Vincent said to the missionaries: "Give me a man of prayer, and he will be capable of anything." (CCD XI, Conference 67, p.76)

With regard to spirituality in general, spiritual accompaniment must make clear from the outset, the difference between Christian prayer and pagan prayer. In pagan prayer, the believer attempts to break down God's resistance; in Christian prayer the one who prays tries to break down her own resistance; pagan prayer is individualistic and closed, Christian prayer is communitarian and open, universal. But the key to the distinction between one form and the other is in the meaningful conviction of the Fathers of the Church: "while the pagans live convinced that they love God, Christians live convinced that God loves us." Good spiritual accompaniment must always begin from this assumption.

8. Mk 4:1-9

9. Lk 13: 18-19

10. Lk 13:20-21

Spiritual Accompaniment

And so, speaking truthfully about prayer means questioning ourselves about the depth of our theological life. As an encounter with the Master, it is a dialogue from heart to heart, that is to say, an attitude of listening, of openness, of availability, of familiarity with God. Prayer consists of raising the mind and heart to God. And so prayer is to the soul what the soul is to the body: soul of the soul; and prayer is to the spirit what bread is to the body: the food of life.

a) **The relationship between prayer and life**, because one cannot be disconnected from the other. Prayer involves a certain distancing from daily tasks. At the same time, it enables us to see our life in the light of the Gospel in order to give it meaning.

b) **Relationship between prayer and community**. Prayer is something that brings people together, that unites. On the contrary, neglect of prayer separates us, alienates us, and distances us. The Our Father is a sign of the unity of the apostles, a sign that they lived in common. It is rightly said that in prayer one comes out of oneself to meet the Other, and one comes out of prayer to meet others; we need to be solitary in prayer to practice solidarity in action.

c) **Relationship between prayer and its demands**. The best outcome of prayer is conversion. The immediate effect is change of heart and life that is expressed in the effort to adjust one's life to the Gospel.

d) **Relationship between prayer and the person**. Prayer brings about a unity that comes from love, that is, a unity which allows a person to be with God, who is not only Truth and Goodness, but also a Person.

e) **Relationship between prayer and options**. The Christian who doesn't pray is nothing more than a fighter who remains a revolutionary who intends to change one system for another. But the Christian who prays commits himself to love humanity in the way that Christ loves.

f.) **Relationship between prayer and word**. The language of the media, the whirlwind of communication, the speed of news, learning languages, and the wordiness of discourses does not always serve

the truth. The basis of the relationship between prayer and the word lies in the fact that prayer is a divine movement of God towards man, where the Word becomes flesh; and it is also a human movement, of man towards God, where the human word becomes revelation in the measure in which it is genuine, truthful, certain, irrefutable.

A good spiritual orientation makes one see that the personal or generalized crisis of prayer is the result of infidelity to the given word, of relativism in relation to promises, of condescension, not straightforwardness in relationships, of individualistic considerations as opposed to the cost of meeting demands.

IV - FOLLOWING CHRIST, THE EVANGELICAL COUNSELS AND SPIRITUAL ACCOMPANIMENT.

In the Gospel of Luke,¹¹ the evangelical counsels are absolutely fundamental conditions for following the Master and being identified with Him. The Company, blessed by the blood of the martyrs, has been called to take on this witness, perhaps not by giving up one's life for the faith but by daily living charity, at times even to a heroic degree.

A disciple of Christ is recognized by a "style of life" and a "style of action" that involve the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience, as the ordinary way of following the Master; this leads to identification with him, not through specific acts but by a process, attitudes and a way of being.

Our commitment to following the Master must be taken on in a world that has changed much since the time in which we began our own vocational process. How can we accept the vital and creative parts of this new culture, learning from it and welcoming it for the Kingdom, from the perspective of the evangelical counsels? How can we preach hope in a world that is frequently marked by fatalism and tempted to despair? How can we follow Jesus in his lifestyle in an era afflicted by economic systems that are undermining the social structures of so many the peoples of the earth? What Good News can we preach from

11. Lk 14: 25-33

Spiritual Accompaniment

our experience of the evangelical counsels in a world that is alienated from God? We can be completely certain of one thing: today the fate of the poor makes our vocation more necessary than ever. And our response to the expectations of those who are poor depends on our being followers of Jesus who was chaste, poor and obedient.

But if we have to confront enormous and interesting challenges today, renewing the meaning of our vocational endeavor with the help of spiritual accompaniment, we need to reflect more deeply on the way that the evangelical counsels can be meaningful for society and for young people. How can we present them as a source of life and energy and at the same time maintain hope for ourselves and others? They are a means of helping us to fulfill our vocation as Daughters of Charity; we came to give ourselves to God for and in the service of those who are poor.

The evangelical counsels are directly opposed to many of the values of the society in which we live, especially to consumerism that is rapidly turning into the dominant culture of the planet. Obedience is in conflict with the idea of human autonomy and individualism; to be poor is a sign of failure and worthlessness in our culture; chastity appears to be an absurd rejection of the human right to sexuality. After we commit ourselves to following the Master by means of the evangelical counsels, it is almost certain that we will meet serious difficulties in persevering at some time in our life. Still more, we could have the impression that these counsels condemn us to frustration and sterility. If we live them as an expression of our love for God and God's love for us, we will then see that any suffering they involve will be fruitful and that the death they cause us to go through will open us to the path of resurrection.

In this context they demand of the disciple a great capacity for recovering the meaning of promises and a profound evangelical sense of freedom.

a) **The meaning of promises:** A loss of trust in promises is obvious today. This can be seen in crises in marriage, the high rate of divorce, the continual request by religious for dispensations from their vows.

What meaning does giving one's word forever have today?

One of the reasons that carrying out one's word isn't considered seriously is that words themselves have gradually lost their significance. Words have become so abundant that they lose their importance in society. Can someone offer their life to another, even to God, by just pronouncing some words? As God's children we dare to do so because God himself first committed himself through his word.

Our generation has been called "the Now Generation" because the culture that matters is that of the present moment. This can be a source of admirable spontaneity, of a freshness and immediacy that we can rejoice in. But if the present moment is one of poverty and failure, of defeat and oppression, then what hope can be found in it? By their nature, the evangelical counsels point to an unknown future. They are an act of absolute generosity because they lead us to give, at some point in our life, what will be lived out in a future time. For many in our culture, this giving oneself to an unknown future is something absurd. I don't know who I might meet and how my heart will react with regard to either chastity or obedience. For us, this act is part of our dignity as children of God. It is a response of trust in God and in providence. The evangelical counsels continue to have a profound meaning, a sign of our hope in God.

b) **The meaning of evangelical freedom:** The beginning of Jesus' preaching was the proclamation of the fulfilment of God's promises, announced by Isaiah: liberty to prisoners and those who are oppressed.¹² This is the text that inspired St. Vincent to take as the motto of the Congregation the words: "He has sent me to evangelize the poor". The Gospel to which we must bear witness is precisely the one that speaks at the same time of the option for those who are poor and of freedom. In other words, our service of poor people, in whatever place they are to be found, must be that of developing in them and encouraging them in the absolute freedom of the children of God: "*for freedom Christ has made us free.*"¹³ It is then paradoxical that we, who must be bearers

12. Lk 4: 14-21

13. Gal 5:1

Spiritual Accompaniment

of liberty to others and must be free ourselves, claim to commit our freedom by renouncing our will. In fact, obedience, specifically, is a scandal to a world that aspires to freedom as a supreme value. But, what is the freedom that we long for?

Our so-called “free world” is often characterized by fatalism, an inability to take our own destiny in our hands and manage our lives. The evangelical counsels confront us with such questions as: What kind of freedom do we desire to live in Christ? How do the evangelical counsels express it? And how do they help us to live the freedom of the children of God? When we speak of freedom and giving our life to the Company, we take as our model Jesus who was obedient to the Father. It is the freedom of being, the freedom of someone who loves.

With regard to the call of Christ that invites us to follow him and to be witnesses of his charity in self-giving, the evangelical counsels demand our entire being.

TWO DIMENSIONS FOR LIVING THE EVANGELICAL COUNSELS AS CHRIST DID.

1. They express total dedication to following the Master who has captivated us because we recognize in Him the model of all models, and not the superficial style of today’s heroes. Still more, he is a model who makes things happen, who becomes the Lord of my existence and whom I want to follow radically, whom I struggle to identify with in chastity, poverty and obedience, and in this way live out my vocation. The counsels express the total and radical way of following the Master.

From this first element we can see that the evangelical counsels radicalize baptismal consecration. This unifying characteristic of the evangelical counsels affects every aspect of the life of a Daughter of Charity and affects her mission which is closely linked to it because living out one of the three evangelical counsels makes us grow in the practice of the other two, just as failing in one of them has a debilitating effect on our practice of all of them.

2. The evangelical counsels have, as I have just said, a clearly apostolic character: they create freedom for the mission, make possible the inseparable biblical unity between vocation and mission, discipleship and proclamation; direct in an irresistible way the call of God towards apostolic self-giving. Love gives us the freedom to be available. The evangelical counsels place us always in the situation of being ready to move on and be “uprooted” and open to any call. The evangelical counsels would not be truly Vincentian if they were not in essence apostolic.

SOME CLARIFICATIONS ABOUT EACH EVANGELICAL COUNSEL

CHASTITY: LOVE LIVED OUT IN CELIBACY¹⁴

a) Radicalization of the affections

With respect to chastity which frees the heart and broadens its dimensions to those of the heart of Christ, the first thing that must be stated is that this is a radicalization of the affections: a gift of God, fruit of the love God has for us, but a gift for both divine and human love. It’s impossible to live chastity without a capacity for loving, so that the strength of the love of a Daughter of Charity must be measured by her ability to admire what she has renounced. Consequently, all that is affection, generosity, self-giving, friendship, must animate our life in such a way that everyone who sees it discovers a life characterized by love. It is only in this way that chastity, lived in faith and hope, can free someone for charity and broaden the heart towards the perspectives of true love. In the light of this great truth, chastity today isn’t identified with the virtue of a purity whose prototype is the marble statue that is white, clean, but terribly cold. I do not believe in the chastity of a sister if her asceticism isn’t translated into missionary affection, motherly pity, demanding charity, and sisterly patience. If our living of chastity isn’t a radicalization of love, it becomes a distortion by its denial of the real value of sexuality. Deep down, the Daughter of Charity is called to love more, to love better, to love everyone.

14. Cf C. 29

b) Eschatological perspective

It must be affirmed that chastity is a true path of liberation, a source of spiritual fruitfulness; it leads the one who lives it and those who are witnesses of it to an eschatological perspective. It has rightly been said that chastity is a way of actualizing Christian hope. As a path of liberation, chastity leads us to overcome attachments, those personal securities that in general are peripheral, and prepares us to be poor and detached and at the same time, obedient, because this is shown in availability to go everywhere. In this sense, the immediate effect of chastity is a great capacity to set out, to forget oneself, to leave everything.

c) A value

Chastity is a value, something to be esteemed so that it may be imitated. It's about a value that is taken on in a permissive world, where sex has become an end, advertisements for diets and the passing beauty of youth are all around us, birth control inundates us, the family is eroded, heroism is done away with, homosexual unions claim to be elevated to the dignity of the family, people live on a superficial level, humanity is out of control...due to the fact that everything is done because of immediate passions and not because of ideals.

However, this world is killing itself because of its unchecked hedonism that has at its root the inability to discover the newness of chastity, to see that this is a strong denunciation of eroticism and a real affirmation of the superiority of man over animal instincts, because sexuality is something more than genitality. Many people today do not believe in chastity because it doesn't seem to make sense to them. But in many cases the meaning has been lost because those who should witness to chastity don't live it as a value, or we take it on as a necessary evil, which has been a stumbling block for those who see us and disastrous for those of us who by vocation are called to live it. In fact, if we don't learn to embrace it in a positive way, we run the risk of poisoning our whole life. Chastity should lead us to a greater degree of loving.

d) The human aspect of chastity

Chastity touches the essential aspects of our human nature, such as the need to love and be loved, sexuality, bodiliness, generative capacity, friendship, social and community relationships, recreation, rest. We must integrate all these elements in our way of following Jesus, although we frequently fear to deal with this, as it touches an area in which have to struggle alone, fearing to be judged or misunderstood. Authentic chastity can only be built on healthy, balanced, altruistic personalities, who become mature and find holiness.

e) Chastity and celibacy

The vocation of a Daughter of Charity implies celibacy and chastity. This doesn't just mean that we don't marry and we forego the stable relationship of a couple, but also we avoid actions and behaviors that are not those of someone with an undivided heart

f) A gift of God

Chastity is a gift from God, a grace that the Lord gives to those whom he calls. This is so true that anyone who isn't capable of living in chastity, despite the sacrifices they make, or who despite their efforts doesn't achieve effective results, or who doesn't feel the happiness of being chaste and of seeing their chastity as fruitful is showing signs that they have not been called to the consecrated life.

POVERTY: SOLIDARITY WITH THOSE WHO ARE POOR.¹⁵

a) Christological significance

Poverty that is lived out as a way of imitating Christ is the most visible aspect of his Incarnation. Being poor and living near the poor was the way that God chose to become man. In fact, no other prophet, no other leader went to the same extremes in practicing poverty as He did: "*The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.*"¹⁶

15. Cf. C 30

16. Mt 8:20

Spiritual Accompaniment

Poverty is not only an evangelical counsel that identifies us more and in a better way with the Master, but it is the one which is most open to everyone and something that any disciple can attain. Any ecclesial community that makes Christ its point of reference for living poverty will avoid loving the poor person more than Christ, and poverty more than the poor person. This truth has three consequences:

- 1) Poverty, like the other evangelical counsels, is open to being practiced in an ostentatious way. Many people boast of their personal poverty in order to denounce the lack of poverty in others who do not seem to practise the virtue as they should.
- 2) Poverty is the evangelical counsel that has the most individual implications and the most personal ways of being practiced.
- 3) This is the evangelical counsel that most affects the others and has a positive or negative effect on them. A Daughter of Charity who practices poverty will find it easier to be chaste and obedient.

b) Apostolic significance

The Vincentian vocation gives a missionary significance to poverty which takes the form of solidarity with those who are poor. This is totally in keeping with the apostolic character of our vocation which, having as its starting point the imitation of Christ, is totally missionary. While chastity affects the individual, guaranteeing unity of life that is manifested in humble control of its own capabilities, obedience promotes the action of the superior and the goals of the community. Poverty has a more direct influence on the mission, for two reasons: missionary availability and the benefits of using and managing goods in common.

c) Communitarian sphere

The credibility of the gospel message seems to depend more on poverty than on chastity or obedience. We only need think how Saint Vincent was famous for his solidarity with poor people, how Francis of Assisi was renowned for the poverty of his personal life to the benefit of the

poor, and Teresa of Calcutta who gave witness through the poor people she served.

d) Evangelical witness

Evangelical poverty and poverty of heart demand a commitment that includes at the same time: dependence on God, a way of being and having, moderation, the community dimension, solidarity with those who are poor and with one's companions. In this respect it's worthwhile remembering that in reality we are not poor, for example, because of our family origins or our nationality, in the sense that we are not subject to the uncertainties of the future or insecurity in our work, as the poor are. While other people suffer from lack of employment or the risk of losing it, we suffer from an excess of work. At the present time we cannot be said to be poor with regard to social security and what the Community does for us when we are ill, nor in relation to the possibilities for education or travel. We must recognize this without any qualms of conscience, but we must witness to poverty! Having goods is not wrong, but we act wrongly when we don't use them in service, for the mission and the Kingdom.

OBEDIENCE: DISCERNMENT FOR THE MISSION:¹⁷

a) Ability to listen

The first thing that has to be said with regard to obedience is its relationship to listening. This is about living together as sisters in community, based on dialogue. The word "obedience" comes from the Latin *obaudire* which means "to listen". True obedience starts to happen when we let our companions speak and we listen to all they have to say. It is, moreover, the path to growing as human beings, being attentive to others and learning from them in our advance toward maturity. Silence and solitude help us to grow in attentiveness and sensitivity to others. Let us not forget that the sublime moment of our redemption came about with Mary's obedience, precisely when she "listened to" the angel.¹⁸

¹⁷. Cf C 31

¹⁸. Cf. Lk 1:26-37

b) Attitude of learning

Obedience is, above all, openness of mind, as is the case in every learning process. Obedience is made perfect when the one who sends and the one who obey come to have the same mind. True obedience extends to ideas and principles. It guarantees unity in the Company and fidelity to its specific mission.

c) Community life

The first place where we practice obedience is in community, because it is there that we listen, learn and discuss. What dialogue seeks is unity of mind and heart for the common good. We dialogue in order to learn from one another so as to reach a consensus so that we will live in sisterly unity. This takes for granted that we will take the time to dialogue when we are developing a common plan or evaluating a work that we all carry out.

d) Personal responsibility

Obedience must never be a way of escaping from our responsibilities. On the contrary, it is a means of sharing our common responsibilities, our different ways of thinking and the ways we can enrich with our personal charisms the carrying out of the mission that we share. Today obedience demands that we take responsibility for meeting the challenges that come with serving the poor. We mustn't let our ability to respond to challenges disappear because of a passivity that has nothing to do with obedience. Furthermore, we are responsible for hastening the coming of the Kingdom and this should make us desire a form of obedience that is more and more participative. Often what paralyzes our actions and prevents us from doing new things is precisely the fear of taking on responsibility. An understanding of obedience that is oriented toward dialogue and sharing of responsibilities could give the impression that it is less demanding and less radical than it was in the past. It seems to me that the opposite is what happens: to the degree that each person's responsibility is affirmed, obedience becomes more authentic because this is demands that we give all that we are and that we accept all that the others can contribute. And as always there is

a tension between the process of dialogue, the search for consensus and putting oneself in the hands of the others. The ultimate solution will always be that of totally abandoning oneself to God's will, as manifested in community, not as a negotiated compromise but as a consensus that is the fruit of sincere, humble and creative discernment.

e) Paschal meaning

Obedience is inseparable from the cross and has a paschal dynamic. It sees and goes beyond the immediate, because it doesn't depend on our conformity, our tastes, our sensibilities. It is a matter of imitating Christ who became obedient unto death.

THE VIRGIN MARY

**The disciple who discerns, the missionary who serves,
the believer who accompanies.**

To sum up our reflection let us contemplate the Virgin Mary who was described by Saint Vincent as "the one who best understood the Gospel and lived it most fully."

1. THE VOCATION OF MARY IN THE GOSPEL OF THE ANNUNCIATION¹⁹

We begin with the scene of the annunciation, because this allows us to take up again the path of ordinary life for a disciple of Christ. It takes place in the small village of Nazareth, in Galilee in the familiar setting of everyday life.

The text highlights two elements:

a) **The action of God:** An angel was sent by God to announce God's plans to a virgin. In his opening words the angel emphasized the role of grace. "*Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you.*" Almost immediately he repeats: "*do not fear because you have found favor with God*"; he twice says to her: "*Your child will be son of the Most High, son of the*

19. Lk 1: 26-38

Spiritual Accompaniment

Most High"; and he finally declares: *"The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you...because nothing is impossible for God"*.

b) **The human response:** grace doesn't act against nature, but builds on it. In fact, the fabric of this biblical scene interweaves the threads of grace with those of a human response. To highlight this, the evangelist gives us information about the place, the age of the young woman, her name, her marriage plans, and the ancestry of her fiancé. Her first reaction is one of confusion, misunderstanding, uncertainty: *"She asked herself what this greeting meant"*; and her second reaction echoed this: *"How can this be possible?"* Her third reaction was to respond **Fiat**. While the words of the angel highlight the theological dimension, Mary's responses underline the human dimension of God's vocational plan.

All work of formation and accompaniment, enlightened by this response of the First Believer, is also a work of God and our response will always be both human and an act of faith: We want to anchor God's call which makes us disciples and our sending by the Master that makes us missionaries, in our human circumstances, enlightened by the faith.

2. SOME WORDS AND ATTITUDES OF MARY REVEALED IN THE GOSPEL

Mary's earlier words portray her as the virgin of discernment and make her a disciple. The words that follow, portray her as the virgin of service and make her a missionary. Taken together, these words make her our companion on the path of formation.

*"Behold the servant of the Lord"*²¹:

Her response to the call is a prayer, that is to say, a response of faith to the divine plan to be carried out in space, in time, and throughout the lights and shadows of the human journey. Implicit in Mary's "fiat" is a necessary condition; openness to God's voice and her fidelity to the end is a consequence of this.

20. Lk 1:38

202

Disciple of "yes" helps us to daily give renewed vigor to our personal and formative vocation through the continued renewal of our availability.

*"My soul glorifies the Lord"*²¹:

Exultant prayer of praise and joy because of the reaction of her cousin Elizabeth who recognizes the Savior Mary carries in her womb.

Our Lady of Joy help us to broaden our vision so that we may understand the Christological aspect of our daily witness.

*"Mary set off in haste for a village in the hill country of Judea"*²²

Her immediate response to the Savior within her was to share this presence with her relations through her service. Union with the Lord is communicated to others and is apostolic

Virgin who responded in haste, help us in our "being with Him" so that we may communicate Him to others; help us to radiate His presence so that others may believe in Him and follow Him.

*"Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months"*²³

An experience of community life in service which proclaims the coming of the Savior in the context of his presence in the world, fraternal relationships become mission in self giving and in union.

Mother of the Church, only Mother of the Company, help us to make our relationships a way of proclaiming Jesus Christ.

*"Mary and Joseph returnedthey continued to search for him... and they found him in the temple."*²⁴

21. Lk 1:46

22. Lk 1,39

23. Lk, 1,56

24. Lk 2, 45-46

Spiritual Accompaniment

The discovery of his absence immediately led to an anxious search. Mary looks for him in the temple; he is only found in prayer, we have to continually seek him in the intimacy of prayer, in faithfully following him and in the gift of service

Our Lady of searching, obtain for us the grace of persevering in prayer.

“My son, why?”²⁵:

A motherly reproach to the Son who had made his parents suffer when he was lost among the pilgrims. A dialogue with the Child who grows to maturity and is formed in an atmosphere of obedience and trust.

Mary of Nazareth, teacher of Jesus, enlighten our work of teaching others.

“Mary remembered all these things and pondered them in her heart”²⁶:

Mary believed and treasured in her heart the gift of revelation and the call made to her.

Silent believer, disciple of meditation and missionary of proclamation, help us to preserve an inner space which will allow us to hear his Word, so that we may understand the Gospel and put it into practice.

“Near the cross of Jesus stood Mary his mother”²⁷

Facing the death of her son and her God, she remained standing upright, in the attitude of a believer and a disciple. The disciple risks the same fate as his Master, convinced that offering one’s life is gain.

Our Lady of strength and fidelity comfort our spirit, strengthen our will, and endorse our response, so that we may bear our difficulties in a paschal spirit and be able to transform our suffering into resurrection.

Father Gabriel NARANJO SALAZAR CM

25. Lk 2: 48

26. Jn 2:5

27. Jn 19:25

204

Letter of June 3, 2012

To all members of the Vincentian Family

May the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ live in your hearts now and always!

As you know, each year we propose a theme for reflection and study as a family, related to the celebrations of our Holy Founder. Last year, we considered the fruits that the celebrations of the 350th anniversary produced in us as a branch of the Vincentian Family at the local level as well as at the general level. We can say that what we experienced together, the fruit of our creativity, enriched us enormously as a family in the following ways:

- mutual relationships were strengthened, other relationships were forged with new forms of spirituality close to our own,
- Vincentian formation was deepened,
- creativity enabled us to have celebrations that expressed cultural and artistic differences,
- our Vincentian vocation was affirmed,
- we grew spiritually,
- we intensified our efforts to be close to the poor,
- the missionary dimension was strengthened,

So these were some of the fruits that were shared after last year’s invitation.

This year, in line with the mystique of our family, I invite you to broaden our Vincentian collaboration. To this end, I propose as our theme: **Collaboration and Evangelization**, and as a slogan: **“Let us work together to share the Good News and communicate life to**

May I start by recalling an event which is certainly well known to everyone, but an event that marks the beginning of everything for us. Just as we say with regard to Jesus: “Everything began in Galilee.” We can say of Vincent: “Everything began in Folleville and in Châtillon.” Just as the confession of the peasant after the sermon at Folleville in 1617, opens Vincent’s eyes to human misery in all its dimensions. It is the experience of solidarity aroused in Châtillon, after he spoke about the needs of a family, that reveals to him the need for organized action in order to meet the needs of people. It is in this same way that we were born as a family, a family that wants to help those who are poor with their immediate material needs, but also sees to their spiritual needs, which make them even poorer. I would even say: a family which, by our life style, challenges and denounces the structures which cause poverty.

Through baptism, we are part of a plan, God’s plan, revealed through his Son Jesus Christ, and which the Gospels reveal clearly: it is the plan of the Kingdom and its Justice. As a Vincentian Family, we have the privilege and the blessing, of having a spirituality which allows us to live this life plan today. Our spirituality comes from a man who asked himself each day: “What would the Son of God do in such or such a situation?”

This family, however, is plunged into a world which, day by day, is moving away from the concept of family, and prefers an individualistic, competitive and egocentric life style. This life style is inhuman, because to be human, in the deepest sense, sense of the term is meaningless without the Other.

In response to this, we offer an alternative proposal to this world. Not only because our way of living seeks to transform this world so that it may become good news for humankind - a transformation which is accomplished by announcing the Good News to those who are poor - but also because we can and want to be a model by our way of working together as a team. Each branch is very different, and this enriches us, but what unites us is Jesus Christ and each branch lives that out in a different way. That’s the way it has been for four hundred years: it is

the Vincentian style, that is, “*Jesus Christ here and now.*”

In practice, I invite you to:

1. Reinforce the local and regional organizations that make us one family. If no such organizations exist, we must lay the ground work for creating them,
2. Consolidate projects for those who are poor, projects done as family. The projects each branch undertakes are good, but if we do them together as a family, they will be even better,
3. Organize times and places for celebrations and prayer together, as a family, enjoying the various local and regional events: anniversaries, jubilees, Vincentian celebrations, etc.

I know that each branch, just like the family in general, faces different situations which often discourage the members and at times can make the work difficult. Sometimes, they are even tempted to follow the inhuman projects which we spoke of earlier. However, the Vincentians were not born for this; they were born to bring Life, and as our Master said, “*life in abundance.*” That is why I would like us to go beyond the qualities that are found within each branch and each member. If we combine these qualities, we can do great work, and our masters will benefit from it.

In conclusion, I would like us to reflect on this metaphor that must be familiar to many of you. However, every time we think about it, we can find something different in it.

Meeting in the carpenter’s shop

In a carpenter’s shop there was a strange meeting taking place; the tools held council to solve problems about their differences. The hammer was the first to hold the presidency, but the assembly informed him that he should resign; he was too noisy, he spent his time striking blows. The hammer acknowledged his fault but he asked that the screw be expelled, too, because he needed to be turned too many times before anything happened.

Letter of June 3, 2012

The screw agreed to withdraw, but he, in his turn, asked for the sandpaper to go also; he was too rough in his relationships and he always caused friction with the others.

The sandpaper agreed, on condition that the same would happen to the tape measure who spent his time measuring others, as if he were perfect.

At this point the carpenter entered. He put on his apron and began to work, using in turn, the hammer, the sandpaper, the tape measure, and the screw. When he had finished, the piece of wood had become a beautiful piece of furniture.

When the carpenter's shop was again silent, the tools continued their deliberation. The saw interrupted: "Gentlemen, it is very obvious that we have faults, but the carpenter works with our positive qualities. That is what gives us value. So, let's forget our weak points and look at our virtues." The group found that the hammer was strong, the screw united and gave solidity, the sandpaper filed down bumps and the tape measure was precise and exact. They felt like a team that could make beautiful furniture and their differences took on a new light.

The Church exists to evangelize, to spread the Good News. In our Vincentian spirituality, this Good News is for those who are poor. May God grant us the grace to continue to be this Good News, so that our Masters in Jesus Christ may have Life and that it may be abundant!

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General

Union and Collaboration in the Life Saint Vincent Some Reflections on our Collaboration within the Vincentian Family

During the International Assembly of the AIC in 2011, I remember hearing a proposal during the course of the discussion which helped me a lot later on. I think that this idea can also help us understand the experience of collaboration that Saint Vincent had and which we can make our own today. This is what the speaker said: "*When we speak about actions to combat poverty, we identify the needs of the person and we look for a response. In my opinion I believe we have to revise the meaning of the word "need" and we have to begin to tell people, "I need you" ... I need you so that together we can build something. This is the best way to help people get back on their feet. A short story best illustrates this point. Abbé Pierre said that his first companion was a person who wanted to commit suicide. Abbé Pierre told this man: do whatever you want, but I need you to help me build a house ... this man became Abbé Pierre's first disciple.*"¹

"I need you!" I need your collaboration in order for us to accomplish some work together. This was how Vincent experienced his relationship with God and his relationships with other people, especially the poor. This led Vincent to change his lifestyle and he collaborated with many people, with poor persons and with God for the great work of the missions and of charity. In the same way, we are also invited today to have this same experience of needing those who are poor, and needing others to continue the great Vincentian work.

1. Taken from Elena Lascida's presentation, *Education as a means of eradicating poverty*, given on April 2, 2011 during the International Assembly of the AIC.

I – VINCENT’S EXPERIENCE “I NEED YOU!”

Poor people don’t want to remain poor. At the beginning of his life, Saint Vincent tried to find social advancement. Preoccupied with financial questions and personal interests, he experienced failure and disappointments but when he began to collaborate with others, his life was transformed and became very productive.

1. – SAINT VINCENT AND THE POOR : “I NEED YOU!”

Poor people were the path that led Vincent to know his true self and to encounter God. Let’s look at some examples:

- As chaplain to Queen Marguerite, contact with so many hungry people helped him to understand the reality in which he lived and he became concerned about the social inequalities of his time.
- In Clichy his pastoral experience with poor people helped him discover true religion.
- In Folleville and in Châtillon the poor who were pastorally abandoned and socially disadvantaged enabled him to discover the profound call of the Gospel and the meaning of his priestly ministry.

Vincent knew how to listen to the external and internal cries of the poor people of his time and allow himself to be touched by them. He learned that the difficult living conditions of the marginalized peasants, the galley slaves, the abandoned children, the sick who had nobody to help them and the hungry poor, constituted a great affront to the human dignity of the children of God. This reality, especially the situation of those who were most poor and abandoned, reveals the transforming power of his personality and his commitment.

At the school of the poor, Saint Vincent no longer saw the Christian faith as adhering to abstract truths, but through discernment of the calls of God, faith was to be expressed in concrete situations of suffering and exclusion. He understood that the poor were victims of a social, political and economic system that inflicted on them hunger, war and disease. Political leaders considered the poor as superfluous, people who should be shut away in order to maintain order and cleanliness in

a town. Saint Vincent saw in poor people the image of the disfigured Christ, and he recognized their dignity as children of God which was distorted. In this way the poor became for him his masters who taught him the need for a faith that was engaged in fostering the mission of charity and those who were most poor revealed to him the need to collaborate with other poor persons in this work of charity. We find a perfect example of this in the origins of the Daughters of Charity who were simple peasant women who gathered together and were trained in the service of charity.

In the face of the outcry of poor people in his time, Saint Vincent adopted an attitude of compassion which took the specific form of missionary and charitable activity, giving proof of affective and effective love for the poor. He was attentive, in a generous and creative way, to the multiple calls of his time; he was not indifferent to any human misery.

2. – SAINT VINCENT AND THE LAITY: “I NEED YOU!”

Three facts show the great importance that Vincent attached to the laity, particularly to women.

- In Châtillon, Vincent discovered a hungry and abandoned family and he appealed to the faithful to help them. *With the collaboration of the laity*, especially women, he began the work of the **Confraternities of Charity**.
- Returning to the De Gondi family, on fire with his missionary experience in Folleville, he began, *with the help of Madame de Gondi*, the work of the missions and he founded the *Congregation of the Mission*.
- Faced with the many needs linked to the service of the poor and the limited involvement of the ladies of high society, *he collaborated with Louise de Marillac and the humble young peasant girl, Marguerite Naseau*, in giving birth, to the **Company of the Daughters of Charity**, thanks to a most innovative initiative.

There is a long list of lay people who shared the life and work of Vincent. This collaboration led him to a deeper understanding of the role and the importance of the laity in the Church’s mission. They have

Union and Collaboration in the Life of St. Vincent

the vocation to participate in the mission of Christ and they are not simply passive, but must be active in the life and work of the Church. The presence of many women in his works was a decisive factor for the service of the poor in the city or in the country. Until now, on the margins of society and the Church, women were now recognized for their values and qualities, and took part in an active and decisive way in the organization of charity and evangelization.

3. - SAINT VINCENT AND HIS COMPANIONS ON THE MISSION: “I NEED YOU!”

After the first sermon in Folleville, Vincent had recourse to the Jesuits in Amiens to help him hear confessions. Because of the numerous calls on him during the missions, he sought collaborators from time to time but many of these were not readily available. In 1625, Vincent brought priests into his work and founded the Congregation of the Mission. It was not born of a preconceived plan, but as a response to a missionary need. The calls of God reflecting the situation of the times led these men to unite their potential with a view to efficacious collaboration. Vincent knew how to listen to the appeals of the poor and bring people together to respond to their needs.

Vincent’s openness to collaboration is also evident in the organization of the Congregation of the Mission. After many years of experience, the Congregation took on a definitive juridical, community and missionary structure in 1658, 33 years after its foundation. The result of this collaboration, under the inspiration and coordination of Vincent, allowed the Congregation to adopt an original style of missionary life with practices, structures and a spirituality that was unique to them.

Vincent described the Congregation of the Mission as “poor missionaries who live simply and whose only goal is to serve the poor country people.” These missionaries, in collaboration with other people enabled the expansion of evangelization throughout France and in other countries. They also contributed to the reform of the clergy and undertook various initiatives for the renewal of the Church in France in the seventeenth century.

4. - SAINT VINCENT AND LOUISE DE MARILLAC: “I NEED YOU!”

In 1625, Jean-Pierre de Camus introduced Louise de Marillac to Vincent de Paul. She was a young widow, 35 years old. From 1629 onwards, Vincent de Paul associated her with his work of charity; he suggested that she visit the Confraternities of Charity. This activity helped Louise grow in the experience of the love of Christ for the poor and freed her from her anguish and doubts. Her life’s horizon was broadened; she saw that God is love and that we must go to him by way of charity. She simplified her piety and devotions and became more involved in ministry.

In the service of those who are poor, she showed herself to be a strong woman, virtuous, talented, with exceptional gifts for direction and organization, creativity and audacity. And so a very productive collaboration developed between Louise and Vincent in the service of charity challenged by many different forms of poverty. Thanks to God and the guidance of her director, she discovered her true vocation in becoming the foundress of a new, original and very innovative, community.

With numerous collaborators, Louise played a decisive role in the formation and animation of a great network of charity. With her feminine sensitivity and her human qualities, she believed in the strength of humble people, in the potential of the young country girls she gathered together to form for the charities. The lasting collaboration between Vincent and Louise reveals a real sharing of their gifts, with the same love for the poor, a productive friendship and mutual aid in growth, fulfilment and holiness.

5. - SAINT VINCENT AND HIS MANY ECCLESIASTICAL AND POLITICAL COLLABORATORS: “I NEED YOU!”

Saint Vincent’s life reveals a vast network of relationships and collaboration. His action is not simply doing what he wanted to do, it is the fruit of an attentive reading of the signs of the times, of a discernment tested out with the help of many other persons.

a) In his personal situation

Vincent is impulsive and sensitive. He seeks to grow in maturity and is willing to be dependent on others.

- In his initial formation, he counted on the generous collaboration of M. de Comet.
- During the difficult years of his crisis of faith and his personal searching, 1608-1612, he found in Pierre de Bérulle a counsellor who helped him grow in human and spiritual maturity.
- He was able to find enlightenment in spiritual masters and in friends, for example: in the theology of the Council of Trent, the teachings of St. Ignatius, Canfield, de Bérulle, St. Francis de Sales and Father Duval, his second spiritual director.

b) His relationship with ecclesiastical authorities and the bishops was a very close one

Vincent began his work of reforming the clergy after a process of discernment with the bishop of Beauvais. He always developed his initiatives with a profound sense of ecclesiastic collaboration especially in three ways:

- He always acted in harmony with the thinking of the Church, faithfully following the guidelines of the Council of Trent and the specific directives of the bishops.
- In obedience to the Church, he sought the support and approval of the pope and the bishops for his foundations: for example, for the approbation of the Congregation and its specific autonomy with regard to the bishops.
- Finally, he always placed his initiatives and his foundations at the service of the Church, trying to respond to the pastoral needs, attentive to the calls of the bishops and collaborating with other ecclesial associations, the Company of the Blessed Sacrament and other congregations, for charitable works.

c) With political and public authorities

Vincent maintained a vast and complex network of collaboration. He was able to rely on his relationships with public authorities and rich

and influential persons to consolidate his missionary and charitable works. For example, during the Thirty Years War and the two Frondes, he organized an immense network to supply and distribute aid which covered nearly all the regions of France. Appointed by Queen Anne of Austria, he became a member of the Council of Conscience, a type of Ministry of Worship, which took on different roles in ecclesiastical affairs, for example the naming of bishops. He even intervened in political affairs, for example: in 1638 with Richelieu, for peace in Lorraine, which had been devastated by the army; then in defense of Irish Catholics threatened by invading English troops; then, during the civil war of the Fronde, he asked Mazarin to resign in order to re-restore peace and put an end to the people's suffering.

Vincent accepted the socio-political structures of his time, the social pyramid structure, the absolute power of the king, and the alliance between political and religious powers. However, he recommended that politics and religion should not be mixed. He sought to collaborate with the political power, but he himself was not, properly speaking, a political man, he did not act from political motives, his primary concern was the public good, especially the good of the poor, and this explains his direct and indirect interventions in politics.

**II - COLLABORATION WITHIN THE VINCENTIAN FAMILY:
“WE NEED ONE ANOTHER.”**

Saint Vincent's experience is a great invitation for us today to collaborate with the groups which make up the Vincentian Family. In his experience we can find guidelines for that mutual collaboration in our own times.

a) Collaboration based on the cries of the poor and collaboration with them.

All Saint Vincent's actions on behalf of those who were poor were developed in a spirit of great solidarity. He acted with the poor alongside him, he defended them, he defended their interests, he served them with love and self-sacrifice, humility, simplicity, authenticity, meekness and sensitivity. He directed all his activities, efforts, abilities, human and

Union and Collaboration in the Life of St. Vincent

material resources towards an effective service of those who were poor, knowing how to learn from them.

Today, this collaboration must spring from the calls of those who are poor and develop into genuine working on the causes of poverty. We must seek together our responses to the calls of the poor, through reciprocal action, which develops the potential and the participation of poor people.

b) Collaboration on behalf of the poor begins with the Gospel mystique of faith, hope and justice.

In the Gospels, there is an immediate relationship between Jesus and those who are poor: whatever is done to the poor is done to Christ. The poor person is a living mediation of the Lord. He or she is the sacrament of Jesus, the place of revelation and of his presence: *“in serving the poor one serves Jesus Christ.”*

This Gospel mystique of charity is the ground root and motivation of all Vincentian collaboration. Charity is a gift of the Spirit. It guides all our action and our faith life.

Charity allows people to live their life in a commitment to searching for a society of solidarity, enriched by new human relationships, based on gratitude and mutual love, with a view to generating authentic life. Without charity, collaboration for the poor can, with the help of sophisticated means and modern resources, produce results, but it will not be able to promote a truly integrated development of those who are most poor.

c) Collaboration in a profoundly ecclesial sense.

The collaboration that was developed by Saint Vincent was not an isolated activity but was part of the Church's life and ministry. Vincent insisted on the importance of union and communion in the community and in the whole Church. He insisted on collaboration and co-responsibility on the part of everyone for the good of the body in its diverse functions and on the service of mercy toward the poor, the

suffering members of the Church.

Vincentian collaboration must be a vibrant expression of mission and charity on behalf of the poor in the Church and with the Church. Our Vincentian commitment is inserted in the Church, in union with the pope and the bishops, and in the pastoral reality of the local Churches, in communion with other ecclesial groups. Our collaboration must always be oriented toward a missionary engagement for those who are poor. We must distance ourselves from any temptation to be involved in successful, prestigious social and ecclesial activity to the detriment of our becoming involved in committed and liberating activities for the poor.

d) Collaboration that empowers the poor and those who collaborate with the poor.

Saint Vincent was a master of empowerment.² He developed processes that helped people discover their worth and their capacity for serving others. Cooperation in ministry with the poor means helping the poor to discover their own capacity for self development.

Missionary and charitable collaboration ought to be action that springs from faith and helps people discover and live with a new inner strength, capable of transforming them and of transforming the reality in which they live. We have to recognize this potential present in each member of the Vincentian family. The Vincentian spirit teaches us that it is important to value and mobilize the poor for service, to promote the missionary potential of the laity, especially women, to invest in the formation of collaborators and give these technical, human and spiritual qualifications so that they may become, not just officials, but servants.

e) Collaboration that is creative, real and diverse.

2. I use here the word “empowerment” which consists of a process in which we recognize that there exists in others a power to develop themselves so that they become the author of personal and social change.

Union and Collaboration in the Life of St. Vincent

With the means and according to the ideas of his time, Vincent engaged in service of the poor as being the way to defend the dignity of the children of God. He undertook charitable works on different fronts combating poverty, with the participation of other people in the Church.

Saint Vincent's experience of uniting forces for the service of the poor is a horizon we can explore in Vincentian collaboration. Charity and justice indicate that aid and social promotion must first of all be understood as a service for acquiring the legitimate rights of every human person. This service of charity is a matter of seeking people's legitimate rights and of action against the causes of injustice which favor the accumulation of wealth and create poverty.

Vincentians have to work with social agencies, politicians, social organizations, and popular movements, so that everyone, according to their own possibilities and qualities, may join together to construct a more just and human society. This collaboration will demand a lot of time and effort to overcome the conflicts that will surface. The Vincentian contribution must always be guided by Gospel criteria and the social teaching of the Church.

f) Collaboration in humble reciprocity and exchange of gifts.

Looking at Saint Vincent, we discover an example of someone who knew how to create links between different currents of thought and organizations, who recognized that he needed others. It was no accident that Saint Vincent emphasized humility as the fundamental virtue. It presupposes that we know our personal limitations and have complete trust in God.

Humility enables us to empty ourselves of our self-sufficiency and makes us dependent on God and on others. No branch of the Vincentian family can be sufficient unto itself. Collaboration invites us to grow in charity and reciprocity with the poor and other collaborators. In the humble sharing of gifts, we are able to grow in charity.

Conclusion

Saint Vincent said we must hasten to serve our neighbor as if we were running to put out a fire. With words, attitudes and effective action, he took on himself the reality of the poor and as far as he was able, he engaged in providing for their needs. He did all this by trying to unite and organize people of good will, so that they acted together to provide better service. Following Saint Vincent, let us pray that the Vincentian Family will be united and organized to better serve the poor.

Father Eli Chaves Dos Santos, CM

Province of San Sebastian

Visit of Sister Evelyne Franc and Sister Rosa Maria Miro, Assistant General to the Community of Bebalem in Chad

December 1 -3, 2011

News
from the Provinces

On the occasion of the tenth anniversary of our arrival in Chad, we had the joy of welcoming our Superior General Father Gregory in May 2011, then our Superioress General Sister Evelyne Franc in December 2011.

The Community of Bebalem in Chad belongs to the Province of San Sebastian in Spain. Because of its special situation, the Visitatrix of the Province of San Sebastian accompanied Sister Evelyne and Sister Rosa Maria Miro, Assistant General, during their visit.

The visitors were welcomed at the international airport of N'Djamena, the capital of Chad, and together we all made our way to Bebalem. Our mission is in a town in the bush, situated in the south of Chad, 70 km from Moundou. It takes a whole day's drive on bad roads to get there from N'Djamena.

The next day, we toured the village together, going first to visit the elderly persons who live alone. Sister Evelyne and Sister Rosa Maria greeted each of them, kneeling down with them with affection and respect,

marvelling at seeing how joyful they are even though they live in very wretched conditions. They met several families some of whom belong to Alcoholics Anonymous. Hearing their testimonies, they encouraged them to continue their struggle against alcoholism. The meeting ended with songs by a group and they offered two roosters which were much appreciated by Sister Evelyne, Sister Rosa and Sister Manuela.



The first Christian woman in Bebalem.

At the nutrition center, our visitors were touched by the difficult circumstances of the mothers who struggle to keep their child alive. The mothers thanked Sister Evelyne for the wonderful care given by the Sisters who help them save their children and to live with dignity.

At the Catholic School of St. John the Baptist, Sister Evelyne admired the good work of the students and the teaching skills of the staff. She is committed to funding a primary school in France sponsored by the Daughters of Charity to create a twinning between the two schools.

During their visit to **the hospital and the nursing school,** managed by the American Evangelical Church, Sister Evelyne and Sister Rosa

Visit of Superiors

Maria were impressed by the mutual respect that the caregivers manifested, the team spirit and the natural empathy in the relationship between the caregivers and the patients. They very much appreciated the good collaboration between the Catholic and Protestant Churches.

Finally, they had the opportunity to see the dynamic life of the parish, the ministry of animation and accompaniment of the Christians, the formation of catechists and those in positions of responsibility, as well as the determination of the faithful in building their church, with so few means available to them. A children's choir and a group of missionary children sang a song written especially for this occasion. It was accompanied by "original" instruments made by the children themselves.

Later, the visitors went to greet the Capuchin Brothers who have a center for handicapped children. They admired all the efforts made by the parents on behalf of the needs of their children who are handicapped and who are often not accepted by society.

Later, Sister Evelyne had the joy of meeting the Vincentians who have been in Bebaem for nearly two years. She encouraged all of us to continue to work in close collaboration for the benefit of those who are poor.

Conclusion

The people of the village were very hospitable and stayed with us during the visit, showing great cordiality. As usual, they were very attentive to the Sisters.

During these three days, so filled with an atmosphere of simplicity, we were able to share on important topics regarding our life as Daughters of Charity: difficult situations in this country, relationships with the people, integral development, pastoral ministry, etc. We appreciated Sister Evelyne's interest in our service of those who are poor and our mission. She strengthened our conviction of being sent by the Company to live the love of God with the truly poor.

We thank God we had the joy of the presence of our Superiors and of our Visitatrix Sister Manuela who brought with her the affection and support of the Province of San Sebastian. With Saint Vincent we say:

"... what a happiness to will nothing but what God wills, to do nothing but what is in accord with the occasion Providence presents, and to have nothing but what God in His Providence has given us!" (CCD III, p. 193)

The Sisters of the Community in Bebaem

Province of Bogotá (Colombia)

THE CIEVI

Ongoing Formation Session
For Latin America and the Caribbean

In 2011, the CIEVI (International Center for Vincentian Studies) celebrated the eleven years it has been at the service of the Daughters of Charity in the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean.

It was set up in response to the wishes of the Visitatrixes of the Province of Latin America with the aim of providing a common facility for ongoing formation for Daughters of Charity of different ages, different ministries and different nationalities and cultures, in order to deepen their understanding of the charism and spirituality of our founders. All this would be within the framework of reviewing present day realities and practicing discernment with regard to the challenges posed by today's world.

Taking part in the CIEVI is an international community experience of three months duration. This year the participants came from Central America, Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil (Curitiba and Rio de Janeiro), Bolivia, Cuba, Colombia (Bogotá and Cali), Chile, Ecuador, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru and the Dominican Republic. It was a formation experience that offered times for intensive prayer and sisterly community, study, group work, drawing up projects and times to relax. The speakers came from a variety of backgrounds and suggested a variety of ways of discovering, assimilating, contemplating, sharing and deepening our understanding of the charism.

The theme that had been chosen was developed over three months and included different aspects of growth in human, spiritual, pastoral and Vincentian domains. We need to understand some important issues: for example, the present day situation in Latin America and the Caribbean, the Church's social teaching, the biblical aspect of pastoral ministry, the special characteristics of a Daughter of Charity, the Marian character of the Company, the background history of France in the times of our founders, the Christology of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise, and the history of the Company.

Every week a group of Sisters presented their province to the other Sisters, describing the early days of the province, its history and what it is like today. They shared some aspects of the province's culture, using audiovisual presentations and putting on an exhibition of folklore items and craftwork typical of their country. During the final week of the session, the Sisters presented the results of their work and the projects they envisaged. Each Sister received a diploma from the University of Saint Bonaventure. The university collaborates with the CEIVI in drawing up the program for the Session and animating it.

We would like to thank very specially the CIEVI coordination group and the Sisters from different local communities who supported us by their prayers. A big thank you to the Company which gave us this opportunity for formation. We pledge ourselves to becoming better Daughters of Charity and to sharing with our Sisters and the poor all the wonderful experience that Providence gratuitously put in our way.

Some of the participants in CIEVI

In Saint Vincent's days.....and in our own times

The Spirituality of St. Vincent

INTRODUCTION

In Andre Dodin's book "Saint Vincent and Charity" the author states very clearly that it is useless to try and define the spiritual teaching of Saint Vincent and he shows that the only way to explain this spirituality is to show how it was lived out by the saint.

So it is by following the life of Saint Vincent and analyzing the way that he himself reflected on his experiences, how he interpreted these and then acted on them, that we will have any chance of coming close to a spirituality that we want to share.

During this reflection we must try to look back on Saint Vincent's experience in the light of our own situation and our needs. We have to try and discover what are the main ways of being faithful to Saint Vincent, ways which must be in keeping with what we often call "our identity." In short, what, according to Saint Vincent, should a Priest of the Mission be in the church and the world of today? This is not the easiest of questions to answer and we must be especially careful to avoid any standardization.

The essential aspects of our reflection can be summarized under these headings: Following Jesus Christ....in order to evangelize the poor in the Church in Community.

Traditionally, this is one of the most basic expressions in the vocabulary of spirituality, but in Saint Vincent's case, it has a very specific, dynamic and functional meaning.

To have a good understanding of this we need to go back to the year 1617. This is the year that Saint Vincent refers to every time he wishes to explain his insights and his foundations. Saint Vincent's relationships with God and with Jesus Christ were profoundly marked by the mystical experience of 1617.

For six or seven years it seems that Saint Vincent hesitated, reflected a great deal, and searched assiduously. He placed himself under the direction of Bérulle whose teaching you are familiar with and he read Benedict of Canfield, the English Capuchin who wrote: "*The Rule for perfection can be summarized in one way, doing God's will.*" He went from one ministry to another, one situation to another, one project to another. On two occasions God revealed himself in an unexpected way in Vincent's life and both these experiences directly involved the poor.

In a very short time, and with increasing certainty, Saint Vincent was convinced that in these situations he had somehow met God. You will remember these passages where he says, "*Alas, my dear confreres, no one had ever thought of that! We didn't even know what missions were, we were not thinking of them at all and didn't know what they were about. This is how we can recognize this as the work of God.*" (CCD XI, 162).

"Would you call human what human understanding didn't foresee and what the human will neither sought after nor desired in any way whatsoever? Poor M. Portail never thought of it; it has all come about contrary to my every hope and without my ever thinking of it in any way." (CCD XII, 6 – 7). And Vincent recalled the God-revealing events of Gannes-Folleville as proof of this.

He reacted in the same way to what happened in Châtillon and spoke about it in the same way. *“It can be said, in effect, that it was God who created your Company. I was thinking about this the other day and I said to myself, ‘Was it you who thought of setting up a Company of young women? Oh, not at all. Was it Mademoiselle Le Gras? It was even further from her mind. I can tell you truthfully that I never thought of it. And who would have thought of founding in the Church a company of women and daughters of charity in secular dress? That would have seemed impossible! I repeat that it was God, not I.”* (CCD IX 165). And to prove what he considered convincing evidence of this, he recalled what happened at Châtillon.

During a period in his life when he was having serious doubts about the faith, Saint Vincent could clearly see how God was intervening in his life. What the spiritual direction given by Berulle, Vincent’s reading and all his seeking, could not achieve, the two encounters with God he had in 1617, did. It seems certain that from this time onward, Saint Vincent would henceforth see events as a sign from God, a very special sign if the event directly concerned the poor. Someone had written earlier, *“Necessity and events are two masters that come from the hand of God.”* (Pascal)

What is sometimes described as Saint Vincent’s pragmatism, is more correctly defined as his attention to what God is saying to him in the event. The same can be said about his prudence because most often this was Vincent waiting for something to happen that would enlighten him about the path to follow. Through events, especially those concerning the poor, God regularly enlightened Saint Vincent and revealed to him His will. This type of relationship and communication was perfectly suited to Saint Vincent’s active nature. In some way, God’s will becomes evident in the very place where it has to be carried out. This leads to the extraordinary continuity which is typically Vincentian: continuity between Gannes-Folleville and the Mission, between the event that took place in Châtillon and the confraternities and then between the confraternities and the Daughters of Charity. God’s revelation and the action that ensued seem to be truly woven with the same thread.

It is this continuity or this short cut between the revelation of God’s will and specific commitment, between Faith and action, which no doubt explains the real human difficulty Saint Vincent has when he speaks about the origins of his foundations. With hindsight, God’s intervention and the saint’s action seemed so closely connected and intertwined that they melted into each other and Saint Vincent, himself, is almost unable to pinpoint the moment of his personal intervention. In this there is something more than just humility. Moreover, Saint Vincent is so accustomed to this continuity and this short cut between God’s presence in the event and his own commitment to action that he ends up mistrusting all detours, even the most noble of them, between faith and action. He is wary of a God who only reveals Himself *“in affections and interior practices of a tender heart, for although these things are very good and desirable they are nevertheless very suspect.”* (cf. CCD XI, 32) and he has his doubts about a response that does not involve action and remains at the level of affective love: *“Let us love God, brothers, let us love God but let it be with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows; there are many who are outwardly recollected and filled with lofty sentiments of God inwardly, but stop at that and when it comes to the point of doing something and they have the opportunity to act, they fall short...So let us reflect on that, especially since in this century there are many who seem virtuous and in fact are so, but nevertheless they are more inclined to a soft, easy way of living than to painstaking, solid devotion.....there is nothing more in conformity with the gospel than, on the one hand to gather enlightenment and strength for the soul in prayer, reading and solitude, and then to go out and share this spiritual nourishment with others. This is doing what Our Lord did, and what the Apostles did after him....it is to imitate the dove which half digests the food it has eaten and then uses its beak to put the rest into its babies’ mouths in order to feed them. That is what we should do, that is how we should witness to God by our works that we love Him.”* (CCD XI, 32-33).

As you can see, the year 1617 had a profound influence on Saint Vincent’s faith and on his relationship with God and with Jesus Christ. We can say, with all the implications that follow from it, that his God is the God of Folleville and Châtillon, and therefore a God who relates to men and in a special way with the poor.

The Spirituality of St. Vincent

Of course Saint Vincent's faith was nourished by the teaching that was current at that time and he could speak about God, Jesus Christ, the Church, the sacraments and the means of holiness in the way that all the spiritual masters of his day did. There was nothing special or original about him in this. What was specific to him and which characterized him spiritually, was that he lived out and saw everything from the perspective of 1617.

That is why for example, what he said about God and his way of communicating with Him are very dynamic and relevant for our times. The three approaches he liked best were Providence, the Presence of God and God's Will; three themes that allowed him to always view God as present, involved in the history of mankind and constantly intervening in events.

Again, he liked the concept of God's will because this was the approach most geared to the present and the one most conducive to action: *"The practice of the presence of God is very good, but I think that adopting the practice of doing God's Will in all our actions is even better, for the latter embraces the former."* (CCD XI, 287). In Saint Vincent's relationship with Christ we find the same selective and some people might even say rather simplistic approach. Jesus Christ is God incarnate in the history of humankind, someone who was extremely concerned about people and therefore involved and constantly active in their history. Jesus Christ is "the Father's Missionary" and it was as Christ the Missioner that Saint Vincent came to know him.

We know that in order to understand more fully the significance of the Gannes-Folleville event, Saint Vincent drew enlightenment from the passage in the gospel of St. Luke (5:18) just as he would refer to the gospel text in St. Matthew (35:5) with regard to what happened at Châtillon.

In Luke 4:18, at the very beginning of his public life, Jesus presents and defines his mission in the words of Isaiah (62:1-6): "the Spirit of the Lord has come upon me because He has anointed me. He has sent me to bring the Good News to the poor." You will remember the literal and deliberately limited comment of Saint Vincent; *"And if we ask*

Our Lord, 'What did you come on earth to do?' 'To assist the poor? And what else? To assist the poor.'" (CCD XI, 98). It is clear that in Saint Vincent's mind, Christ came for this and only for this.

So Jesus Christ is the One Sent by the Father to the poor. Now in the Church and the world of Saint Vincent's time, the poor were neither evangelized nor assisted; the mission of Christ was not being continued.

Saint Vincent's life and his action plan were, therefore, to continue the mission of Christ, "the evangelization of the poor." So it is that the theme of continuity and the words "following Christ" became fundamental and dynamic for Saint Vincent.

Jesus Christ becomes the model for a Missioner's life and his actions, *"Since Our Lord has recommended this to us, we have to apply ourselves to it. He wills it; He is the Rule of the Mission."* (CCD XII, 110).

We should note in passing that it is quite significant that Saint Vincent should give as rule, both to the Priests of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, not the gospel but the living person of Jesus Christ. It is true that from one point of view this amounts to the same thing. However, the spontaneous choice of emphasis is none the less significant.

We find again this type of approach and relationship to Jesus Christ in the passages where he is happy to see that Jesus lived and practised the gospel message before preaching it and making it his teaching. This earlier activity delighted Saint Vincent and is connected with what has been described as his pragmatism or his prudence. He always insists on the primacy of experience and life over the written word and what is institutional: *"Holy Scripture tells us that Our Lord Jesus Christ, having been sent to earth to save the human race, began, first of all to do and then to teach.."* You will have recognized the opening words of our Common Rules and this reflection is also found in the passage that precedes the text of the Rules of the Daughters of Charity; *"You have a big advantage over several communities who have had their Rules drawn up and approved after two or three years. Later, experience*

The Spirituality of St. Vincent

showed them that some things should not have been written in them.... Well, Sisters, this has not been the same for you, since you have been practicing for more than eighteen years what was later written down. You have done what Our Lord did, for he taught by his works before preaching about what he wanted people to do. Oh how blessed you are!" (CCD XIIIb, 324).

From 1617 onward, Saint Vincent resolutely set himself to follow Christ and he committed the Company of the Mission to following the Christ who was sent to the poor. This last named detail is of the utmost importance for understanding the precise thinking of Saint Vincent and for sharing in his experience and his charism.

You know that all forms of Christian spirituality are nourished by the same Gospel. They are differentiated by the way they choose to understand the gospel and the emphasis that they put on such or such an aspect of the message. For Saint Vincent, the key to reading the Gospel was undoubtedly the passage from Saint Luke (5:18). It is striking to note how Saint Vincent remained logical and consistent on this point, interpreting all the actions and gestures of Christ, as well as his teaching, from the perspective of his missionary project stated in Lk 4:18. Evangelization of the poor always marked and influenced Saint Vincent's reading of the Gospel.

So the manner of imitating Christ advocated by Saint Vincent is not the one suggested by Thomas à Kempis and still less the one proposed by Bérulle. It was very much a matter of imitating Christ, the missionary, who was sent to the poor.

Since Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is this missionary, and only this, (cf CCD XI, 107), and since we have decided to follow him and continue his work, it is completely logical and necessary that we imitate him. For us it is Jesus Christ the missionary to the poor that we have to try and imitate

This brings me to make a quick digression to mention Vincent's thinking on holiness. It is a holiness based on the model of Jesus Christ, the perfect Missionary of the Father.

To have the most accurate idea of Saint Vincent's thinking about what constitutes holiness for a Priest of the Mission or a Daughter of Charity, it would be good to study the frequent references he made in the conferences he regularly gave on the virtues of those who had died and the texts we have of his letters. In the Congregation of the Mission a saint would be first of all a good missionary, a Bourdaise, a Lambert aux Couteaux, just as a saint in the Daughters of Charity would be, above all else, a good servant of the poor – a Marguerite Naseau, a Louise de Marillac, a Barbe Angiboust.

By continuing the mission of Jesus Christ, the priest or brother of the mission and the Daughter of Charity would have no greater guarantee of success on their journey towards sanctity, than by imitating Christ the missionary. This way of imitating him is selective and specific. For us missionaries, Saint Vincent kept the five virtues which are like the faculties of the soul of our Congregation: simplicity, humility, gentleness, mortification and zeal. Why these particular five virtues?

Saint Vincent waited a long time before choosing these virtues and it was the same with the Daughters of Charity for whom he finally settled on simplicity, humility and charity. He explains this elsewhere.

The spirit that characterizes the priests and brothers of the mission is, in fact, only what was lived out in the early years of the Congregation. So Saint Vincent takes as his starting point, life and experience; not some abstract reflection on an ideal.

Saint Vincent recommended these five virtues as the "professional" qualities of the missionary, in imitation of the rule, which is Jesus Christ. In proposing these virtues Saint Vincent was, of course, repeating what the great spiritual masters had already said on the subject, but what was original in Saint Vincent's case was his insistence on the functional aspect of these virtues or what he often called their "usefulness."

When contemplated in the person of Jesus Christ the Missionary, these virtues are, above all, special means for evangelizing the poor and therefore, special means of attaining perfection as missionaries.

Here we would need to take up the entire conference of August 22, 1659 on “The Five Characteristic Virtues” (CCD XII, 243-253). At the moment I am only reflecting on a few passages from it. “That is the strength and power of the Gospel teachings” said Saint Vincent in the introduction to this conference, “out of which I am choosing mainly those virtues that are most fitting for missionaries. And what are they? I’ve always thought and believed that they were simplicity, humility, gentleness, mortification and zeal.” And the criterion for choosing these five virtues was: the Mission!

SIMPLICITY

“Now, my dear confreres, if anyone in the world should have this virtue, it is the Missioners, for our whole life is spent in practicing acts of charity, either towards God or towards our neighbor. And for both one and the other, we must proceed simply, with the result that, if these are things we have to do which concern God and depend on us, we have to avoid all subtlety, for God is pleased with simple souls and communicates his graces only to them. If the things concern our neighbor, since we have to assist our neighbor corporally and spiritually, *bon Dieu*, how careful we must be not to appear wily, clever, crafty and above all, never to say a word that has a double meaning! Ah, how far that should be from a Missioner.” (CCD XII 246). And he also said, *Our Lord, almighty as he was, adjusted himself to the level of the weak. If I have two ideas, one beautiful and clever, and the other more commonplace and less showy, I’ll take the latter and give up the former. Let us settle for what is ordinary; let the scholar appear to have an ordinary level of knowledge and the strong man who works labour humbly, for whatever is said or done for the poor people in a patronising spirit is vain and useless; it goes over their head; the wind carries it away over the housetops, and what Caesar’s bloodstained garment did, among those who carried it, is like what these preachers do who make a display of novelties, curiosities and strange things, in a grave or mournful tone of voice.*” (CCD XII, 209).

With regard to **HUMILITY** his thinking is on similar lines. “That is the second teaching absolutely necessary for Missioners, for, I ask you, how could a proud person adapt to poverty? Our purpose is

to serve the poor, uneducated common people. Now, if we do not adapt ourselves to them, in no way will we do any good for them. The means of doing good, however, is humility because, through humility, we annihilate ourselves and establish God as the Sovereign Being..... this state is proper to the Mission and if that is not the case, we have reason to fear that we do not have the spirit of a true missionary.” (CCD, XII, 248).

As for **GENTLENESS**, “a missionary needs forbearance with regard to outsiders. The poor people whose confessions we hear are so coarse, so ignorant, so obtuse – not to say stupid – that they don’t know how many gods there are or how many persons in God. Make them say it fifty times and in the end you’ll find them as ignorant as they were in the beginning. If someone isn’t gentle enough to put up with their boorishness, what will he be able to do? Not a thing. On the contrary, he’ll discourage those poor people who, on seeing that, will be put off and will never be willing to come back and learn the things necessary for salvation. (CCD XII, 248).

MORTIFICATION is also proposed and defined within the specific framework of the life of a missionary: “When we go to give a mission, we don’t know where we’ll be staying or what we will be doing. Things may be very different from what we had planned, since Providence often upsets our plans. Who, then, doesn’t see that mortification is indispensable for a missionary in dealing not only with the poor common people, but also with retreatants, ordinands, galley convicts and slaves? For, if we are not mortified, how can we put up with what has to be endured in these various ministries? How can missionaries like poor M. Le Vacher, of whom we hear no news, who is in the midst of poor slaves in danger of the plague, and most likely his brother is as well, how can they see the sufferings endured by the poor people entrusted to them by Providence without feeling these themselves? Let us not deceive ourselves, my dear confreres, missionaries must be mortified.” (CCD XII, 250)

Finally **ZEAL**, which is the flame of charity. For Saint Vincent, it is also a more practical and functional virtue, the exact opposite of laziness and seeking a comfortable life style. “O Saviour! O my good

The Spirituality of St. Vincent

Saviour, may it please your Divine Goodness to keep the Mission free of that spirit of laziness and of seeking its own comforts, and give it an ardent zeal for your glory, which will make it accept everything joyfully and never refuse an opportunity to serve You. That is what we are made for.” (CCD XI, 191).

This, then, is our spirit as defined by Saint Vincent when he also explained the reasons for choosing these particular virtues. We cannot fail to be impressed by his logic and the unity of what he produced, a unity regarding the mission and for the mission.

One day Vincent de Paul wrote to Francois du Coudray and said about simplicity, *“It is the virtue I like best.”* (CCD I, 265). After 1617, Saint Vincent’s spiritual world which up to that time had been quite complex and not very fruitful, became unified, deeper and simplified. And it would seem that everything he gained by this simplicity was also valuable for action and commitment and the mission.

Yes, Saint Vincent’s faith seems to us to be simple and dynamic. His relationship with God and with Christ seem simple, as do his interpretation of the Gospel and his concept of holiness. There is a unity, coherence and dynamism in this which can still be a challenge for us today.

There is a fine paragraph in Saint Vincent’s conference to the Daughters of Charity on the subject of work, a passage that gives us some idea of the familiar and concrete way Saint Vincent thought about God. *“God, himself,”* he explained, *“works unceasingly; He has worked unceasingly and He shall work unceasingly...God works...in the creation and conservation of this great universe, in the movement of the stars, in the influence of the planets, in the produce of land and sea, in the constitution of the atmosphere, in the regulation of the seasons and in all that beautiful order we observe in Nature, which would be ruined and returned to nothingness if God did not ceaselessly support it. In addition to this general work He works with each one in particular. He works with the craftsman in his workshop, with the woman in her household, with the ant and the bee to amass their hoards, and he does so constantly and continuously. And why does He work? For man, my*

dear Sisters, for man alone, to preserve his life and to procure him all that he needs. Oh! then, if a God, the Emperor of the world, has never ceased for a moment to work interiorly and exteriorly ever since the world has been the world, and has done so in cooperation with even the least of earth’s productions, with which He concurs, how far more reasonable is it that we, who are His creatures, should work, as He has said, in the sweat of our brow! A God works unceasingly and a Daughter of Charity is to remain idle! Is she to persuade herself that all she has to do is to serve the poor? And is she to remain idle when she has few or none to attend to?” (CCD IX, 384).

In a very simple but striking way this passage shows us how Saint Vincent presented God as being very close to us, present everywhere, and directly involved in the history of humankind, “for man, for the sake of man alone.”

EVANGELIZATION

We have seen how, in the thinking and experience of Saint Vincent, the Congregation of the Mission is defined, first of all, in relation to God and to Jesus Christ. For Saint Vincent, being a missionary means, above all, dedicating oneself to following Christ and continuing the work of Christ who was sent by the Father. A relationship with Jesus Christ the Missionary, is for Saint Vincent, the foundation and essential nature of the Mission. *“It is this that the missionaries profess; applying themselves especially those who are poor just as Jesus Christ did. Our vocation, therefore, is a continuation of his, or at least it is continuing his work in our situations. Oh! What a happiness, my brothers! But what an obligation we have to love this vocation!”* (CCD XII, 71).

And speaking to the Daughters of Charity, Saint Vincent said, *“What happiness, my daughters, that God should have chosen you to continue the work that his Son did while on earth.”* (CCD IX, 14).

The word “continuation” that Saint Vincent liked to use, expresses very well what is special about his relationship with Jesus; it is something like a relationship between partners engaged in the same enterprise. You will have noticed that it was based on what, for want

of a better term, we have called the functional or professional aspect of Vincentian spirituality, a spirituality for action, one that is immediately translated into action and commitment, a spirituality for the mission.

We will see that Saint Vincent looked on the Church as the institution responsible for the evangelization of the poor and, as he said, “*It needs workers, but hardworking ones!*” (CCD XI, 33). Here again we have a word that is important in Vincentian vocabulary; he uses the word “workers” to describe the missionaries and even all Christians in the Church. Similarly, for the Daughters of Charity, the term “servant” had a professional meaning before it took on a mystical connotation; the Confraternities of Paris asked for real servants and it was as a servant that Marguerite Naseau offered her services.

Saint Vincent lived a very long time before the industrial age and in any case he was a peasant. For him it meant “workers for the harvest” but what I would like you to notice is this dynamic, practical, active and functional aspect of his spirituality.

So Christ was sent by the Father to fulfil a mission, to do a work. In 1617 Saint Vincent had the clear impression, almost the proof, that Jesus Christ was involving him in the work and wanted him to be a partner. For Vincent, this work meant, “*making God known to the poor, proclaiming Jesus Christ to them, telling them that the kingdom of heaven is at hand and that it is for persons who are poor.*” (CCD XI, 71). The priest and brother of the mission belong to the mission, therefore, IN ORDER to evangelize poor people: this objective was chosen by Saint Vincent to even appear on the official seal of the Congregation of the Mission: *Evangelizare pauperibus*.

“To evangelize”.....”the poor”. We will take each of these two terms to try and get a closer insight into what Saint Vincent understood by evangelization and also the way he approached poor people in order to evangelize them. But first we must pay some attention to what Saint Vincent considered to be the aim of the Congregation and I deliberately use the word AIM in the singular. This question of the objective of the Congregation of the Mission has roused and divided some of our general assemblies and in the Constitutions it was formulated in

somewhat vague terms; the evangelization of the poor was reduced to an emblem that unites people, a common denominator. But even so, the emblem seemed too specific and something of a commitment. So we have the famous note explaining this and saying that the evangelization of the poor is the primordial but not the only objective, and it is a sufficient but not a necessary criterion for determining our works!

This firmness and precision about the aim of the Congregation of the Mission is maintained throughout all Vincent’s correspondence and conferences. What sometimes led to a certain ambiguity was the tendency to confuse objective with options or works. So the Congregation settled for definitions that were descriptive; that were has stirred passions and divided some of our general assemblies and in the Constitutions it was formulated in somewhat vague terms; the evangelization of the poor was reduced to an emblem that unites people, a common denominator which includes everything. But the emblem seemed still to be too specific and rather committed. So we have the famous note interpreting this and saying that the evangelization of the poor is the primordial but not the only objective; that in itself it is an appropriate but not a necessary criterion for determining our works!

To reason in this way one must not have studied Saint Vincent, or have chosen to be no longer in solidarity with him. With Saint Vincent the matter is clearly and consistently affirmed; without the evangelization of the poor there would never have been the Congregation of the Mission or its priests and brothers. The evangelization of the poor is not just one of several reasons, it is THE reason why the Congregation of the Mission and all its members exist. This is stated without any shadow of doubt in the founding contract for the Congregation of the Mission, signed on April 17, 1625 and the wording is very strong. “*in order to apply oneself entirely and exclusively to the salvation of poor people.*” (CCD XIIIa, 214). These words are repeated in all the official documents; in the contract of association of September 4, 1626, in the royal approbation, in the contract of union signed with the priory of Saint Lazare (CCD XIIIa, 263) on January 7, 1632, in the Papal Bull for the erection of the Congregation of the Mission, January 12, 1632, etc. (CCD XIIIa, 296)

This firmness and precision with regard to the objective of the Congregation of the Mission never ceased to be affirmed and emphasized in all Saint Vincent's letters and in the talks he gave. What sometimes led to a certain ambiguity was a tendency to confuse objective with options or works. So they arrived at a descriptive type of definitions; to the evangelization of the poor, for example, was added the work with seminarists and then, in our Constitutions of 1954, charitable and educational works were added. It is true that this process was already evident in Saint Vincent's day. We find traces of it in our Common Rules where the aim of the Congregation of the Mission was set out under three chapter headings;

1. *Propriae perfectioni studere*
2. *Evangelizare pauperibus, maxime ruricolis*
3. *Ecclesiasticos adjuvare*

Like all founders, Saint Vincent must have written to Rome asking for the Rules to be approved and he would have written in a literary style and one which showed a good understanding of canonical procedures. But Saint Vincent himself gives us the authentic interpretation of our Common Rules, particularly in the famous conference of December 6, 1658 as well as in all his letters and conferences.

As for the *propriae perfectioni studere* (applying oneself to one's own perfection), for example, at no time and in no way would Saint Vincent envisage this as an objective distinct from and independent of the Mission. The perfection he put before us was very much that of a missionary modelled on and following Christ, "the Father's Missionary sent to the poor." This was Saint Vincent's own type of holiness and one that we are called to share. At this point we need to introduce a reflection on Saint Vincent's thinking about prayer; a reflection based on texts which deal with the way Saint Vincent approached the subject with the Priests of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity. Here again we see that Saint Vincent was familiar with classical and traditional methods of prayer. He spoke sincerely about these and then he clearly named the one he preferred.

For Saint Vincent, prayer is undeniably a very intense time in the spiritual life; but it is an intense time spent in the mission and for the

mission. In meditation the missionary examines his life in the presence of "Jesus Christ the Missionary". Meditation? It is reflecting on today's events in the light of Jesus, the One sent by the Father to the poor. Saint Vincent gave us as the model for prayer, the prayer of the president; "*I think about what I have to do during the day and make my resolutions accordingly.*" (CCD IX, 25). We should read again the passages where Saint Vincent denounces all forms of meditation that distance us from real life and the present time but we haven't time to stop and consider this now. In short, everything that Saint Vincent says to us leads us to the conclusion that the *propriae perfectioni studere* is included in the *Evangelizare pauperibus*.

As for helping ecclesiastics that we mentioned earlier, it is obvious that to Saint Vincent's way of thinking, it was related to the evangelization of the poor and was indeed a means of achieving this. At this point I will only recall for you two well-known passages: "*to work for the salvation of the poor country people..that is our vocation...it corresponds to God's eternal plans for us; to work for the salvation of poor country people is the main purpose of our vocation, and all the rest is only accessory to it; for we would never have worked in ministry for the ordinands and in seminaries for the clergy, if we hadn't judged that this was necessary to maintain the people and preserve the fruits of missions given by good priests. In that we imitate the great conquerors who leave garrisons in the places they capture, for fear of losing what they have acquired with so much difficulty. Aren't we very blessed, my dear confreres, to live authentically the vocation of Jesus Christ?*" (CCD XI, 121).

And secondly, "*But perhaps someone will say 'Suppose I'm busy with the ordination retreats or with the seminarians?'* That is good when God is pleased to use us for that and obedience sends us, in that case it is fine! Here again, however, we would be in a terrible state, so to speak, since, as I told you, those things are only accessory to our principal aim." (CCD XI, 122-123)

You are not unaware that words like: "capital", "principal", "accessory", are often used by Saint Vincent. The principal or capital work is always the evangelization of the poor, and only that. Everything else

is, quite simply, accessory. The objective of the congregation of the Mission and of all men who join it is, therefore, the evangelization of the poor; that is the reason why the Congregation and its members exist. It is also the overriding criterion for the organization of the Institute in its structures, its community life and during the long and difficult discussions on the vows.

For Saint Vincent, the congregation is an instrument for evangelizing poor people. Its principal characteristic and its primary obligation is to continually adapt itself to the needs of evangelization. I don't think there is any need to emphasize other points; the flexibility, adaptability and particularly the mobility that Saint Vincent demanded of his foundations and their members.

The aim of the congregation, to Saint Vincent's way of thinking, was also, despite what was written in the note to the constitutions, the criterion for choosing options and making commitments. Logically, it would be difficult to see this any other way. We noted earlier, with regard to the work with seminarists, the comment, "*If we hadn't judged this to be necessary.*" We could say the same about all the many options Saint Vincent agreed to, for the Confraternities, the Priests of the Mission or the Daughters of Charity. So, in his conference of December 6, 1658, Saint Vincent doesn't see any contradiction at all between an objective that is clearly and exclusively defined, and a multitude of different options. This is only a question of historical or canonical interest; today the problem for all of us is to find a balance between the pastoral and the spiritual. The reasoning process that Saint Vincent had to undergo with regard to the aim of our congregation in order to agree to and justify his options, is something that we ourselves have to engage in as we constantly have to go back to the only reason for our existence, the evangelization of the poor.

BUT WHAT DID SAINT VINCENT UNDERSTAND BY EVANGELIZATION?

Quite naturally, he started off from the traditional understanding of the word "evangelization" that was generally accepted in his day.

Then, little by little, his pastoral and missionary experience and that of his institutes brought him to an ever wider and more complex understanding of it; one that is fairly close to what we think and live out today.

1. There is no point in thinking back to the theology of evangelization at the beginning and during the first half of the seventeenth century. This **theology** was created at a time when Christianity reigned and **for an era of Christianity**; that is to say, the problem was not one of faith per se but rather one of religious practice, and a religious and moral life consistent with that faith. From this came the importance given to the sacraments and more especially, to general confessions. In the early days, missions would have been organized by Saint Vincent along the lines of a good parish retreat. It is astonishing to note the parallel between the advice Saint Vincent gives for individual and collective retreats at Saint Lazare, and the usual rhythm of a parish mission, at least in the beginning. So, in the past, evangelization was something that tended to preach moral living and religious practice in conformity with acquired or accepted faith.

2. However, two things apparently non-provocative in themselves, had already come to disturb somewhat this pastoral theology. On the one hand there was **the division of the Church** and on the other hand the impetus towards missions abroad and consequent contact with non-Christians. These two factors were to have serious repercussions on both theological thinking and pastoral and missionary action.

The first factor concerns the Huguenots (**French Protestants**), and this seemed a simple matter for most of Saint Vincent's contemporaries; it could just be a matter of robust controversy leading either to condemnation or abjuration. In a pastoral context, the way that Saint Vincent acted in this particular area, appears to be very nuanced and respectful. For him, the Huguenots, at least the most convinced and sincere ones, could offer a healthy challenge to the Church. And you are not unaware that at an important stage in his spiritual development, Saint Vincent allowed himself to be challenged. We should pay special attention to the passage from CCD XI, 28-30.

“One day Saint Vincent told his community the story of the conversion of a heretic whom he, himself, had brought to the true faith. Before giving in, the Huguenot asked the saint to answer an objection. ‘You told me, monsieur, that the Church of Rome is led by the Holy Spirit but I find that hard to believe because, on the one hand, we see the rural Catholics abandoned to pastors who are ignorant and given over to vice, with so little instruction in their duties that most of them hardly know what their religion is. On the other hand, we see towns filled with priests and monks who are doing nothing: there are perhaps ten thousand of them in Paris, yet they leave the poor country people in this appalling state of ignorance in which they are lost. And you want to convince me that all this is being guided by the Holy Spirit! I’ll never believe it.’”

Deeply impressed by this objection, the saint replied to the heretic that *“he was ill –informed regarding the matter they were discussing ; that there were many parishes there with good pastors and priests; that among the numerous clergy and monks in the cities, several were going to country places to catechize and preach; that others were devoted to meditation and to chanting the praises of God day and night; that still others were very helpful in serving the people by the books they write, the doctrine they teach, and the sacraments they administer; and if there were a few useless ones who did not carry out their obligations as they should, these were individual men subject to human frailty and they are not the Church. When we say that the Church is guided by the Holy Spirit, that means generally speaking, when it meets in the Councils, and also privately, when the faithful follow the inspirations of faith and the rules of Christian justice. As for those who stray from that, however, these are resisting the Holy Spirit and, even though they may be members of the Church, they are, nevertheless, among those who live according to the flesh, as Saint Paul says, and they will die.”* The heretic wasn’t convinced. The following year, Vincent de Paul returned to Montmirail with M. Feron, at that time a Bachelor of Theology and later Doctor of the Sorbonne and Archdeacon of Chartres; M. Duchesne, a Doctor at the same faculty and Archdeacon of Beauvais, and some priests and religious from among his friends. He was coming to give a mission in that place and in the neighboring villages. The heretic was curious enough to attend the sermons and

catechism lessons; he saw the care that was taken to instruct those who did not know the truths necessary for their salvation, the charity with which the priests adapted themselves to the weakness and slowness of mind of the most unrefined, and the marvellous effects the zeal of the missionaries brought about in the heart of the greatest of sinners. Moved to tears he went to find the saint and said to him, *“Now I see that the Holy Spirit is guiding the Roman Church , since such care is taken in the instruction and salvation of poor village people: I’m ready to enter it whenever it will please you to receive me.”* *“Don’t you have any more difficulties?”* asked the saint. *“No,”* replied the heretic, freed now from his erroneous beliefs, *“I believe everything you told me and am ready to renounce all my errors publicly.”* The saint questioned the man and when he was sure that the now convert had a good knowledge of the essentials of Catholic teaching, he told him that he would accept his abjuration and would absolve him from heresy in the church of Marchais near Montmirail, where he was giving a mission at the time. On that day, after the morning sermon, Vincent called out loud the name of the converted man and asked him publicly if he was still disposed to abjure his errors. After replying in the affirmative, the former Calvinist showed the people in church a statue of Our Lady that was very crudely made and said, *“I can’t believe that there is any power in that piece of stone.”* *“The Church doesn’t teach that there is any power in these material images,”* replied the saint, *“ except when God is pleased to impart it to them, as He can and did do in the past to the rod of Moses that brought about so many miracles, as even children can explain to you.”* Then, addressing one of the brightest children he asked him what the Church taught about sacred images. The child replied that *“it was good to have them and to give them the honor due to them, not because of the material from which they were made, but because they represent to us Our Lord, Jesus Christ, His glorious Mother, and the other saints of paradise who, having triumphed over the world, invite us, through these silent figures, to follow them in their faith and good works.”*

This was an excellent answer. The saint repeated the child’s words and had his listener admit that they answered completely the difficulty he had raised. He postponed to another day the ceremony of abjuration to give the faith of the new convert time to be affirmed. And it was so

The Spirituality of St. Vincent

well affirmed that, after the public profession of Catholicism, nothing could shake him. “*Oh! What a happiness for our missionaries,*” added the saint, “*to confirm the guidance of the Holy Spirit on His Church by working, as we do, at the instruction and sanctification of those who are poor.*”

In this attitude of allowing himself to be challenged and to make a response, there is something about the saint that most of his contemporaries did not share. We know, too, the advice he gave to his missionaries on this subject. He wrote to Guillaume Gallais, Superior at Sedan, about a court case involving a Catholic and a Huguenot, “*how do you know that the Catholic has good grounds for seeking the justice he is asking for? There is a big difference between being a Catholic and being fair-minded.*” (CCD II, 494).

In November or December 1659 he wrote to Philippe Patte, a Brother of the Mission, and a doctor, at Nantes, “*I am really distressed to learn that you will have some heretics on board ship and, consequently, much to endure from them. But, after all, God is the Master and He has permitted this for reasons unknown to us. Perhaps it is to oblige you to be more reserved in their presence, more humble and devout before God, and more charitable towards your neighbor, so that they may see the beauty and holiness of our religion and be moved to return to it. Be very careful to avoid every sort of dispute and contention with them, and be patient and kindly in their regard, even if they attack you or our holy faith and customs. Virtue is so beautiful and amiable that they will be compelled to love it in you, if you practise it well. It is to be desired that, in the services you render to God on board ship, you make no distinction of persons and show no apparent difference in your treatment of Catholics and Huguenots, so that the latter may know you love them in God. I hope that your good example will be helpful to both. Please take care of your health and that of our missionaries.*” (CCD VIII, 208-209).

On May 23, 1659 Saint Vincent wrote to Jean Martin, “*The conversion of heretics and sinners alike is the result of the absolute mercy and omnipotence of God alone, and it comes about when we are not thinking about it rather than when we are seeking it. Still, we must*

not stop working at it when opportunities present themselves because God wills this.” (CCD VII, 583).

These few comments and counsels may seem to us today rather feeble, but in the seventeenth century and perhaps even up to 30 or 40 years ago, they reveal **a mind that was very open and pre-ecumenical.**

The second element which in Saint Vincent’s day undermined somewhat the calm days of evangelism in a Christian era and its rather formal style, was **the experience and the impetus of the missions “ad gentes.”** After the great expeditions and discoveries of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a new field of apostolic action was opened up to the pioneers of evangelism.

The Church of Christianity and theologians then found itself facing an unprecedented pastoral situation, or rather, one that had long been forgotten. Without stopping to develop this point, let us notice in passing that there was at this time, what might be described as some sort of theology of minimal spiritual vitality and a sacramental system which responded to urgent necessity; baptism, of course, and the famous “truths necessary for salvation.”

Well, if I mention this with regard to evangelization, it is because ever since the first missions preached on the de Gondi estates, Saint Vincent seems to have spontaneously applied that theology of minimal spiritual vitality and that urgent pastoral ministry, to the poor country people. This was so appropriate that later on, when missionaries had to confront paganism in Madagascar and elsewhere, they hardly needed to change anything. It would be interesting to study the letters of Fr. Nacquart and Fr. Bourdais on this subject.

CONCLUSION OF THIS REFLECTION ON SAINT VINCENT’S THINKING ABOUT THE EVANGELIZATION OF THE POOR

At a very early stage, in his plans for evangelization and missionary work, Saint Vincent had to see the problem in a different light in order to focus it, not on life and action that are regulated by faith, but on faith itself and on love of Jesus Christ. Saint Vincent was very moved

and completely taken aback by what he called “the ignorance of these poor people”, an ignorance, moreover, which he blamed on the clergy and you will be familiar with some very harsh criticisms that Vincent made on this subject: *“the Church, which is heading for ruin in many places because of the bad life of priests...for they are the ones causing it to perish and destroying it: and it is only too true that the depravity of the ecclesiastical state is the principal cause of the ruin of God’s Church. Recently I was at a meeting where there were seven Prelates, who, reflecting on the disorders in the Church, were stating loudly that the clergy were the principal cause of this. So then it is priests. Yes, we are the cause of this desolation ravaging the Church and the deplorable diminution it has suffered in so many places.... so let us think about how we can improve the ecclesiastical state, since bad priests are the cause of all those misfortunes and are the ones who draw them down on the Church.”* (CCD XI, 279-280) What Saint Vincent most strongly reproached priests for was the kind of life they led, but above all else, he condemned their professional failings, that is to say, he declared they were responsible for the country people’s ignorance and the peasants’ lack of faith or abandonment of their religion. From this time onward, his concept of evangelization put more emphasis on the importance of proclaiming the faith than on what today we would call worship. As I have already reminded you, evangelization meant, for Vincent *“making God known to the poor; proclaiming Jesus Christ to them and telling them that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand and that it is for those who are poor.”* (CCD XII, 71).

And this is very much because Saint Vincent, even in completely Christian times, saw evangelization as proclaiming the Gospel, that he put all his efforts in missionary and formation animation into two pastoral teaching methods – preaching and catechesis. Unfortunately we haven’t a lot of time to say more on these two points. It is true that the methods he used then have become somewhat outdated and no doubt they have little to teach us today....yet we should surely gain some profit by reading CCD XI, 237-260, 265-269, 342-345; XI 234-242.

With regard to preaching, a subject about which we often only remember his advice on the “little method”, Saint Vincent emphasized

two points in particular; the Gospel and “going into detail.”

* **The Gospel**, first of all, because this is what the missionaries have to proclaim, this and nothing but this. Over and over again he reminded them that the Gospel has to be proclaimed simply, soberly and well, in the way that Jesus and the apostles did; *“God is with the simple and the humble; He assists them, blesses their work and blesses their undertakings. Quoi! Are we to believe that God will help a person who is trying to ruin himself? Quoi! That He’ll help a man to ruin himself, as do those who preach other than simply and humbly, who preach themselves, etc? Such a thought cannot even enter our mind! Oh, brothers, my dear confreres, if you only knew how harmful it is to preach other than the way Our Lord Jesus Christ did here on earth, as the Apostles preached and as many servants of God still do today, you would be horrified!”* (CCD XII, 21).

* The second essential point; **“going into detail”**. *“We have to familiarize them with moral theology and always go into detail so that they hear and understand it well. This must always be the goal, acting in such a way that those who are listening take away with them everything that was said to them in the instruction.”* (CCD XI, 10). Here we find again one of the constants in Saint Vincent’s spirituality; faith that is not expressed and which is not shown in a person’s life and actions, is an illusion. When we proclaim the Gospel to the poor, we must always make the connection between the Word of God that we preach, and concrete situations in the life of the poor. There are scarcely any of Saint Vincent’s sermons and homilies still preserved today yet we know that his words were down to earth and convincing. At both Folleville and Châtillon, he went into detail and made a clear connection between the Gospel and what was a specific situation. You know the results!

Here again it was experience that led Saint Vincent to this way of preaching the gospel in a simple way, applying it in a direct manner that was adapted to specific situations and commitments.

With regard to catechesis, Saint Vincent was even more of an innovator. He ended up seeing it more important than preaching. “I

am very saddened,” he wrote to a missionary some time around 1657, “that instead of holding the main catechism session in the evening, you have been preaching sermons during your missions; this should not happen;

1. Because the one who preached in the morning could be unhappy about this second sermon
2. Because the people have more need of this catechism class and derive more profit from this
3. Because in catechizing, it seems we have a better way of honouring the way that Jesus Christ used to instruct and convert the world
4. Because it is our custom, and because it has pleased Our Lord to bestow great blessings on this practice which gives us another means of practising humility.” (CCD VI, 400).

And again: “Everyone agrees that the fruits of the mission are due to catechesis, and someone of high rank said this to me recently, adding that all missionaries study ways of preaching well but they had no idea of how to catechize: he said that in my presence and that of some good people. In God’s name, monsieur, warn your confreres about this. In my opinion, when you are working, one of you should take the main catechism class, and the other take the “little catechism” session, because, as I said before, people agree that the fruits of the mission come from catechesis.” (CCD I, 19-420).

Indeed, during the missions the morning and evening catechism sessions were the most important times of the day and what led Saint Vincent to prefer it to preaching, was that it took the form of a dialogue and demanded a high degree of simplicity; the questions and the answers of those taking part obliged the missionaries to come down to the level of the good people and adapt to them. In CCD XIIIa, 173-179, we have a real lesson in how Saint Vincent catechized, the workers in the Nom de Jésus, teaching them about the Sign of the Cross. We notice in this, the quality of his teaching method and the way he inspired confidence in his hearers: “These are the two main reasons you have for learning. I will begin by asking you some questions and if you can’t answer them very well, don’t be worried. I will ask you if you know how to make the Sign of the Cross, and if you

don’t know how to do it don’t worry. You are not the only ones. How many people are there at court, and even Presidents, who don’t know how to do it! That should help you to overcome any embarrassment we usually feel when we don’t know what answer to give to someone who asks us questions. And it is pride that makes us feel ashamed, because we always want to appear somebody. You must act like these good country folk who show that they are so anxious to learn that they come along to us and say, ‘Monsieur, I’m very much afraid I don’t know the things I ought to. I have not been taught them. Ask me some questions, please, to see what I know.’ You see, then, my brethren, how these good people are not ashamed to appear ignorant.” (CCD XIII, 179).

Saint Vincent preferred this occasional and spontaneous catechesis to systematic and organized teaching. He spoke about this in a conference he gave on November 17, 1656: “at the beginning of the Company it was exact about the practice of letting no opportunity pass to instruct a poor person, which the men did if they saw that the person needed it; priests, seminarians and our Coadjutor Brothers all did this, as they came and went. If they met some poor person – a boy or some good man – they would speak to him to see if he knew the mysteries necessary for salvation, and if they found he didn’t, they would teach them to him. I don’t know if today we are still as careful to observe this holy practice. I am talking about those who go into the country areas and stay at inns along the way.” (CCD XI, 343).

Saint Vincent preferred this form of catechesis and evangelization simply because it dealt with people in their own life and work. At the end of this same conference, he recalled the example of Our Lord “when He went to sit on that stone that was near the well, and once He was there, began to instruct that woman by asking her for some water. ‘Woman, give me some water,’ he said to her. (Jn 4: 7-38). So he (the Brother) can ask one and then another, ‘Eh bien! How are your horses getting along? How’s this? How’s that? How are you doing?’ , beginning like this and then moving on to what he had planned to speak about.” (CCD XI, 344) Starting off from real life situations, as Jesus did with the Samaritan woman, and then leading up to proclaiming the Kingdom, Saint Vincent was already familiar with a method that many people today regard as a modern discovery!

So having started off with a fairly conventional and narrow idea of evangelization, and his early missionary experience centred on religious practice and especially general confession, he gradually moved the focus of the aim and orientation of evangelization towards Faith and proclaiming the Gospel. This explains the importance he gave to preaching and catechetics, both of which brought the gospel into direct contact with the day to day life of people, particularly the poor.

But if evangelization only meant proclamation it would be truncated and even deceptive. Evangelization has to go as far as making the gospel effective. That is why Saint Vincent denounced missionaries who wanted evangelization to remain at the purely pastoral level or related to worship... *“If there are any among us who think they’re in the Mission only to evangelise poor people but not to alleviate their sufferings, to take care of their spiritual needs but not their temporal ones, I reply that we have to help them and have them assisted in every way, by us and by others. To do that is to preach the gospel by words and works, and that’s the most perfect way...”* (CCD XII, 77-78).

In order to show this decisive progression we would need to study all the social and charitable enterprises of Saint Vincent and see how, in acting as he did, he considered all his work to be on the level of evangelization.

It is this which led Saint Vincent to the conclusion that evangelization is not exclusively the domain of the clergy but **something that involves everyone**. In this matter we have some texts that are worthy of Vatican II: *“All Christians are missionary by nature and vocation.”* Evangelization comes from baptismal vocation, not ministerial or priestly vocation. This is because we evangelize just as much if not more, by the sweat of our brow and the strength of our arms, than by resounding sermons and the incense of worship. On this particular point, Saint Vincent spoke in the same way to priests, Brothers of the Mission, Daughters of Charity and lay people. So this also concerns in a very direct way, the Daughters of Charity and the wounded soldiers they cared for,

As you continue this reflection, try to ask yourselves what are your ideas on evangelization, your commitments and how you act in the Church and the world of today. What we have been talking about has brought us to the very heart and essence of our Vincentian vocation.

Someone who is unhappy about this might take offence at such a complete involvement of faith in our relationship with the poor, and identifying Christ with the poor could be felt in some way to be frustrating the relationship. They would say that we have to encounter the human person and give all our attention and commitment to caring for him; we can’t at the same time be concerned about anyone else, even Jesus Christ himself. So some people might think there is something a little undesirable about trying to discover Jesus Christ in the poor.

Thanks be to God this was not Saint Vincent’s way of reasoning; that would have left him scarcely any time for action. But if somebody had come along to make this objection, Saint Vincent would no doubt have responded as he did to those who never got around to committing themselves to action. Saint Vincent’s faith, that faith based on living experience of Christ’s presence in the poor, never caused him to undervalue, in the slightest way, the poor person or minimize the burdens the poor had to bear because of their place in society.

We now have to make a rapid review of the extraordinary unity that the **mystique of this relationship** brought to Vincent’s life and his spirituality.

Saint Vincent was a practical man who spontaneously analyzed, reflected and meditated on events and integrated what he experienced. This was an impressively logical and consistent process. So what happened at Châtillon, seen in the light of Matthew’s Gospel (25:31), became the path he would gradually follow and become the keystone of his balanced outlook and his works. Everything was organized, more or less consciously, around this affirming testimony; *“Jesus Christ is in those who are poor and this is as true as it is that we are here.”* (CCD IX, 199)

The Spirituality of St. Vincent

So it is, for example, that might be experienced as a time of tension and conflict, became for him something extremely simple. From then on, Jesus Christ was in the poor, Faith and Mission, Faith and Service, Faith and Life, all these were in perfect harmony. If it was a question of prayer and service, there was no longer a clash between the two; *“My daughters, the service of the poor must always be given preference over everything else.”* This categorical statement meant that there could hardly ever be any exceptions no matter how noble the reasons might appear to be. Saint Vincent explained, *“You can even miss Mass.”* And for good measure, he adds, *“even on feast days, in case of necessity,”* The reasoning on which this principle is based is an interesting one, *“In this you can be sure that you are keeping your Rules and even more, since obedience is considered by God to be better than sacrifice. It is God, my daughters, whom you wish to serve. Do you think that God is less reasonable than the masters of this world? If the master says to his servant; do this, and then asks for something different to be done before the first order could be carried out, he will not think it was wrong for the servant to abandon what he was first asked to do; on the contrary he is even more pleased by this. So it is with our good God. He has called you to a Company... He has given you Rules so that you can obey them, He is asking for you in other places: go there, my Sisters, and be absolutely certain that this is God’s will.”* (CCD IX, 171-172). What is noteworthy and very significant for us in this passage as we want to come closer to Saint Vincent’s spirituality and his spiritual experience, is the ease and spontaneity with which Saint Vincent blends together and identifies in one single entity, the God who speaks through the Rule, the God of prayer, the God of the Mass and the God who is present in the poor person. For him, it is quite simply the same Master who first of all commands one thing and then orders something else to be done. It is “leaving God for God.” Saint Vincent says that seeing Christ in the poor brings unity and continuity to his faith, his life, prayer, the Eucharist, the Mission, service. To arrive at such a unity between faith and life it was enough for him to have truly encountered Jesus in the poor.

Thank God, we are all aware of the gospel values that are evident in the lives of poor people. Today, Saint Vincent is asking us to go a step further and study these more deeply before going beyond the values

themselves till we encounter the living person of Jesus Christ even if what became evident for Saint Vincent risks being an endless struggle in faith for many of us.

To end this reflection, let us truthfully ask ourselves about the quality of our relationship with poor people on a social, pastoral and mystical level. Like Saint Vincent we have to maintain all these three dimensions, even if the third is the one that must nourish and animate the other two. May Saint Vincent help us to make progress in meditating on, understanding better, and applying to our lives, the words of Lk 5:18, and Matt 25:31; these texts which represent the true inspirations and the pivotal lines of Saint Vincent’s reflection and spiritual experience.

(To be continued)

Father Jean Morin, CM

**The person who loves
is not self-absorbed,
but becomes a space
of welcome for the other**

**We can truly love
only by renunciation
and creating in ourself
an unlimited space
to welcome the other**

**It is always time to love.
Let us not linger over our past,
except to remind ourselves of the mercy
poured out on us today**

Maurice Zundel

Extract from “God does not live behind the stars”

