

The Vincentian Charism, Vincentian Spirituality and our Way of life

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1. Introduction

The theme that has been given to me is rooted in the Vincentian experience of Jesus. The Vincentian charism and Vincentian spirituality are centered on an encounter with the poor Christ present among those men and women who are poor. There were two key questions that Saint Vincent had to answer: Who is Jesus? How do I follow Jesus? During the process of his conversion Vincent gradually began to understand the meaning of those two questions. His conversion was a process of coming to know Jesus and thus, walking the path of the disciples, the path of the Kingdom.

As Vincent walked along the path he gave meaning to charism and spirituality that, in turn, allowed him to create a life centered on the charism. Here, however, Jesus took the initiative. Jesus extended an invitation and Vincent struggled to give a response. The poor Christ was revealed and Vincent had to open himself to that reality. The Spirit of Jesus acted and Vincent responded with the gift of his life.

The charism that Jesus revealed to Vincent was that of service on behalf of the poor. That charism was and is a gift of the Holy Spirit ... a gift to build up the Kingdom of God. Charisms are always related to the Kingdom. The evangelical element that the Vincentian charism highlights is that the Kingdom of God is for those who are poor. Charism is not an idea that was invented by Vincent de Paul but rather charism is a gift of God that Vincent discovered during his journey.

Charism is a mystery. The meaning of the charism is revealed during the course of history and the Vincentian experience. No one --- not even Saint Vincent --- completely understands all the consequences that are involved in accepting the gift. Little by little the Holy Spirit guides us so that we might be able to live the charism in the midst of new situations. The Spirit always allows

new revelations, new ideas and new lifestyles that will ultimately enable people to live the charism.

The charism always includes the dynamic of “call-response”. The poor Christ calls us from the peripheries and invites us to respond. Vincentian spirituality is the response to the call of the poor Christ dwelling in the midst of those who are impoverished.

It should be stated that Vincentian spirituality is not a series of references to the writings of our Holy Founder nor is it some prayer formulary or virtues or works or acts of piety. Rather Vincentian spirituality is the following of Jesus present among those who are most poor and excluded from society. Certainly all of those other realities have their place, but only in as much as they help us to follow Jesus, evangelizer of the poor.

Allow me now to point out five characteristics of a Vincentian spirituality that allows us to live the charism.

2. Five characteristics of Vincentian spirituality

2.1. God leads us into the midst of the world

In the person of Jesus God becomes inserted into our world as brother and savior. God does not save us from above nor from outside but rather as a part of humankind.

We do not bring Christ to the world! Quite the contrary ... it is God who leads us into the midst of the world. The world is God's creation, the place of God's grace and the place of our salvation. To separate ourselves from or to attempt to escape from the world is not a Vincentian way of acting. Yes, sin exists in the world and so there are elements that blur and hide the presence of God, that disfigure God's image. But, as Saint Paul states, where sin abounds, grace abounds in great abundance.

Vincentian spirituality is a commitment with the world. The problems of the world are our problems. All the sufferings and weaknesses of our brothers and sisters are not foreign to us. Perhaps we do not have all the answers to their problems. Nevertheless, we stand together with them, shoulder to shoulder, and with all those who journey through this world we question the present reality of the world. Here, the task is to be more human.

We are in the world as people who are bearers of the gospel message. To evangelize is not only to catechize and celebrate the sacraments. Rather evangelization is liberation from every evil that oppresses humankind ... it is to create a new relationship with God the Father and with our brothers and sisters.

The Good News of the gospel is not good news because I say so but rather because men and women experience a transformation in their evil situation. Evangelization does not begin with pious words or the recitation of verses from the Bible, but rather evangelization begins with a response to the bad news that people endure in their flesh and bone: hunger, unemployment, conflict, violence, lack of meaning in their life, poverty.

2.2. God waits for us among the poor

When Christ invites us to follow him, he does so from the midst of the poor ... and from the midst of the poor we have to answer: who is God? Who are the poor? How do we reconcile ourselves with the poor? This is the primary axis of our spirituality. Allow me offer three clarifications:

- *The poor have value in themselves:* I do not reach out to the poor simply because Christ is present there. I reach out to the poor because they are my brothers and sisters who are suffering. They are a priority in the Kingdom of God and therefore, I care for the poor because they have a personal human dignity; they are the subjects of their own life and not the recipients of sympathy and alms.
- *Christ calls us to serve the poor, not only “the good poor”:* At times we speak about being evangelized by the poor. I do not believe that we understand that phrase correctly. We are speaking about “the good poor”, those who go to Mass, live a good moral life, share from their own poverty. I believe, however, that the call is to serve the poor, good and bad alike. We cannot ask people if they are worthy or not of our service and then care for them according to their response. Yes, even bad people will evangelize us and we are called to love those who are not so loveable. It is often those who are not loveable who will put us in contact with our own sinfulness and weakness ... those who are not loveable invite us to be compassionate.
- *Christ’s presence is sacramental:* Saint Vincent speaks about “encountering” Christ in the poor and rarely does he speak about “seeing” Christ in the poor. That is because Christ’s presence is sacramental and not physical. To speak about “seeing” Christ in the poor creates confusion because it is a pious manner of speaking but does not correspond to our experience. If one literally “sees” Christ in the poor that one is either a mystic (and there are not many mystics) or one needs professional help. To speak about “seeing” Christ in the poor is to create a world of fantasy and false expectations. The experience of Christ in the poor is sacramental. It is a faith experience that tells me that the encounter with the poor is more than a passing event. It is not a self-evident truth but rather is the result of a faith-filled reflection on the encounter with the poor. Frequently I only become aware of Christ’s presence after said encounter with the poor.

2.3. Christ invites us to participate in the mission

To follow Christ among the poor means that we are missionaries. The missionary spirit is not a desire to walk and move from place to place. In fact, going from one place to another to another is probably more an obstacle rather a positive element of the mission.

To be a missionary is to leave one's proper world and one's secure place in the world in order to enter the world of the other; it is to leave one's place in order to enter the place of the poor and to accompany the poor with the gospel. This is a difficult task. From an economic and social perspective we are probably somewhere in the middle while the poor live on the peripheries ... and there on the peripheries there is a distinct reality, different values, a different culture, different religious expressions. Here we are not necessarily referring to some geographical change but rather to be a missionary is to adapt oneself to the reality of the poor.

A danger for every missionary is to impose one's reality on another: my way is the only way; my religious expression is the only valid one; I know what the poor need and what they want (without having to ask them). It is here that the Vincentian virtues take on an important role: the humility to listen and to accompany without ordering; the simplicity to understand my true motives with regard to mission; the mortification to sacrifice something of myself for the good of those who are poor; the gentleness to resolve cultural clashes; charity and evangelical zeal expressed in a desire to enter into a new world.

To state this more simply: the missionary challenge is to know how to live and share the gospel in another reality.

2.4. Christ sits with us in prayer

Vincent speaks about being contemplatives in action ... he is not telling us that we have to become monks or cloistered men and women nor is he promoting a form of spiritual schizophrenia which separates the spiritual life from the apostolic (pastoral) life. Rather Vincent is encouraging us to allow Christ and his gospel to enlighten the various situations of our life. We are invited to engage in a personal dialogue with Christ about our experience among the poor: the signs and the countersigns of the Kingdom, our personal and interior reactions, community possibilities, etc.

Prayer is not something we do for God but rather is something that God does for us. In the dialogue with God, God makes us more sensitive to his presence and his movement in history. God questions us, strengthens us and points out the path of love and justice and freedom.

2.5. Christ enables us to be charitable

The goal of Christian spirituality is love. When speaking about Vincentian spirituality that love is more specific since it refers to the communication of mercy and solidarity to those persons who are excluded from society.

Saint Vincent spoke often about Providence which should not be understood as a form of Christian good luck. We are mistaken if we understand Providence to mean that things will turn out well. Providence is God's desire to save all his children from evil. We are all in God's hands and God us to create new possibilities for life: fraternity, organization, justice, reconciliation, etc. We share what we have received from God, namely, his mercy. Even when things do not turn out well, God's Providence is still present. Christ and his followers always seek the good for their brothers and sisters and offer them the hope of something new.

Charity is not simply works and projects. Rather it is an encounter between brothers and sisters. Gustavo Gutiérrez says: *You say you love the poor; what are their names?* It is very possible to serve the poor without listening to them, without giving them our time and our life. Ultimately, Vincentian spirituality means we insert ourselves among the poor in order to love them as brothers and sisters.

3. Lifestyle

The characteristics of Vincentian spirituality are incarnated in a lifestyle. That includes the structures of our groups, our works, our religious expressions, etc. In this gathering we are from many countries and many cultures. I will not even attempt to mention all the different possibilities. Perhaps in the small groups we can better grasp that reality. Here I simply want to mention some elements that can help us in our reflection on our lifestyle:

- **Formation:** We have to examine the manner in which we are preparing the members of the different branches of the Vincentian Family. Is it a formation that enables them to insert themselves into the life of the poor? Does our formation create a missionary attitude of listening and adaptation? Do we really present a Vincentian spirituality?
- **Dialogue with the poor:** Doing things for the poor is not enough. The more important question is: Do we approach the poor as brother and sisters who listen to them? We have to create structures and opportunities so that the poor can speak and offer an opinion with regard to our service.
- **Team work:** One of the signs of the Kingdom is the building up of a community. One of the signs opposed to the Kingdom is the inability to work as a team. There is a need to create bonds among the branches of the Vincentian Family, other groups and with the poor themselves.
- **Apostolic Reflection:** It is important to reflect upon our service on behalf of the poor. We have to ask serious and honest questions about our apostolate: what are we doing? Why do we do this in the way that we do? What are the needs of the poor? What is the

origin of those needs? Who are the people that we are serving? What does the gospel tell us about our service?

4. Question for dialogue in small groups

Does our lifestyle (ministry, structures, expressions of our faith, etc.) lead us to a flexible response or is it an obstacle to our service on behalf of the poor?

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