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

*Ignacio Fernández de Mendoza, C.M.
Vicar General*

The General Assembly of 1992 approved the following decree: *“The Superior General will direct the elaboration of an Instruction about the Vows of the Congregation of the Mission, in which Stability will be especially treated.”*

Allow me to inform you about the steps the Instruction followed from infancy to maturity.

On October 6th, 1992, that is, a few months after the closing of the General Assembly, the Superior General named a commission charged with elaborating the Instruction on the Vows. The committee was composed of Fathers Leon Lauwerier, Miguel Perez Flores, Hugh O’Donnell, John Prager, Benjamin Romo and myself, representing the General Curia.

The Commission met for the first time at the Curia from February 21st to March 6th, 1993. The result of this first gathering was an initial draft divided into nine chapters. The outline chosen at that time would fundamentally remain through the final draft.

The Commission itself named a subcommittee, of the following Fathers: Leon Lauwerier, Miguel Perez Flores and myself, who agreed to meet in Salamanca beginning on October 14th, 1993. Father Lauwerier took sick and the General reinforced the Commission with a new member, Father Jaime Corera.

The subcommittee, now composed of Leon Lauwerier, Miguel Perez Flores, Jaime Corera and myself, met in Salamanca on the proposed date, 14 October 1993. Father Lauwerier did not participate at this meeting for health reasons. The subcommittee put together a new text which was sent from Rome at the beginning of November 1993 to the other members of the Commission so that they would make the observations they thought important.

When these were received, the subcommittee met in Rome on December 8, 1993. The new draft of the text was then sent to all the Visitors, Vice-Visitors and their Councils so that they too could forward their suggestions.

On May 14th of 1994 the full Commission met again in Rome in order to examine those responses. They were certainly numerous and of a varied nature. There was a suggestion that something like an encyclopedia be put together, covering everything about vows in general. Another, on the other hand, preferred a brief Instruction containing only references to vows in the Congregation. The majority of the Visitors and Vice-Visitors wrote and sent in valuable contributions. The Commission took them into account.

The work of the full Commission produced a new draft of the text. For the Commission this would be the definitive one.

Before leaving Rome, the Commission then gave the text to Father General so that, once seen in General Council, he could proceed, according to his judgement, to its approbation. The text was composed of seven chapters in this sequence: Jesus Christ Rule of the Mission; Vows of the Congregation of the Mission: Juridical Aspects; Stability; Chastity; Poverty; Obedience. The following sections were also added: An anthology of texts of St. Vincent about the Evangelical Councils and the vows, vow formula and certification, and bibliography.

This text was submitted by the General to the Council for its consideration on April 12th, 1994. The General Council formulated numerous observations about the redaction and the content of the Instruction. The General then gave the Commission's text to Father John Prager so that he would incorporate as far as possible the suggestions made by the General Council and re-write again one by one the chapters of the Instruction. The result of Father Prager's work, which took from April 9th to May 19th of 1995, was an almost definitive text, organized in the following way:

TITLE: *Instruction on Stability, Chastity, Poverty and Obedience in the Congregation of the Mission;*

GENERAL INDEX; Chapter I: *Jesus Christ is the Rule of the Mission;*

Chapter II: *Stability, Fidelity in the Evangelization of the Poor;*

Chapter III: *Chastity: Celibate Love;*

Chapter IV: *Poverty, Solidarity With the Poor;*

Chapter V: *Obedience, Discernment for Mission;*

Chapter VI: *A Brief History of the Vows in the Congregation of the Mission;*

Chapter VII: *Canonical Aspects of the Vows of the Congregation of the Mission; Vow Formula, Certification for Emitting Vows and Bibliography.*

To each of the five chapters was added an anthology of texts for meditation, taken from the writings of St. Vincent de Paul.

The first two drafts were written in Spanish. The definitive text, written in English, was presented to General Council on October 6th, 1995. Once the General's presenting letter was written, he promulgated the Instruction on January 25th, 1996, Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul. Fathers Jaime Corera and Emil Toulemonde translated the English text to Spanish and French respectively.

The Instruction appeared in *Vincentiana* on February 24th, 1996. *Vincentiana* published 4,170 copies, corresponding to their edition of January-February 1996, of which the majority were sent to the provinces.

PLACE AND CONTEXT OF THE INSTRUCTION

The word "*instruct*" comes from the Latin word "*instruere*" which means to teach and inform about something. The noun "*instruction*" refers to an ensemble of rules or teachings on a certain subject or simply the act of teaching.

The new Instruction does not contain all that could actually be said about Stability, Chastity, Poverty and Obedience in the Congregation of the Mission, but only what is essential for the reader to gain a sufficient and global comprehension of the vows.

The writings of St. Vincent, the Constitutions, the Statutes and the Fundamental Statute on Poverty, continue to be, in reality, the basic documents to which the confreres ought to turn in order to understand and above all to live the vows they took. The Instruction is not intended to substitute or replace said documents: it intends to explain them and open their richness.

The Instruction, the same as the Ratio Formationis for the Internal Seminary, the Ratio Formationis Vincentiana for the Major Seminary of the Congregation of the Mission, Brothers for the Mission, Powers of the Superior General and of the Visitors in Relation to Missionary Commitments and other documents which it is not necessary to list, are born within a particular context of the Congregation of the Mission. Once the General Assemblies that produced the new Constitutions were completed, the next Assemblies, of 1986 and 1992, made decisions about explaining certain points of the Constitutions, among other ways by publishing different documents. The Instruction comes then from this context and with a finality like that of the aforementioned documents which appeared after the promulgation of the new Constitutions.

At the same time the General Assembly of 1992 in the section "New Men" asked all confreres to commit themselves to "live and deepen themselves in the Evangelical Councils and the five virtues." What the Assembly sought was really to indicate some apt means of revitalizing the theological and spiritual dimensions of the Congregation of the Mission. The Instruction comes from this same context and seeks the same end.

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF THE INSTRUCTION

Attempting to indicate some characteristics or particular aspects of the Instruction, the following are worth mentioning:

THE CHRISTOLOGICAL VALUE OF THE VOWS

The Institution frequently makes reference to the foundation of everything, that is, to Jesus Christ and the Gospel. Those who pronounce vows decidedly take on Christological and Gospel values. The confrere declares himself a life-long follower of Jesus Christ, Evangelizer of the Poor, chaste, poor and obedient. The ultimate motivation for accepting the Evangelical Councils and Vows resides in the example and teaching of Jesus Christ.

VINCENTIAN VALUE OF THE VOWS

Repeatedly present on the pages of this Instruction we find reference to Jesus as St. Vincent saw him "*Jesus Christ is the rule of the Mission*" (XIII, 130/XI 429). Even more, St. Vincent wished from the beginning that the confreres commit themselves to follow Jesus Christ in what he did and how he did it, for life, in poverty, chastity and obedience. The Instruction takes into account the historical tradition of the Congregation.

MISSIONARY VALUE OF THE VOWS

Someone has qualified the Vows of the Congregation with this phrase: "*Vows for the Mission.*" Reviewing the Instruction we notice frequent mention of the vows for service... vows in order to evangelize... vows directed to the ends of the Congregation. In other words, the vows are not ends in themselves, but are made as a gift of the missionary to God and to the evangelization of the poor. They contain great missionary value.

PROPHETIC FUNCTION OF THE VOWS

The Instruction frequently mentions the culture of our time. Sweeping and rapid changes characterize our world. Values and their opposites run together and live side-by-side. In the first five chapters the Instruction reveals the prophetic value of the vows. As paradoxical as it may seem the vows taken by the confrere free him of personal interests in order to follow Jesus Christ for the Mission. In good measure, according to the Instruction, therein lies their prophetic value. In the midst of the culture and the world a reasoning and a wisdom are revealed which differ from human reasoning and wisdom.

SOMETHING NOVEL ABOUT THE INSTRUCTION

Allow me to mention something new in the Instruction. Responding to the tone of the 1992 General Assembly, the Vow of Stability has left behind its last spot in the listing, as occurs e.g., in Chapter III of the Constitutions, to occupy now the first place. This movement itself reveals a fact: Stability is peculiar and characteristic of the Congregation of the Mission. As the Instruction says, this Vow "*gives a missionary feel to the other Evangelical Councils and directs all of a confrere's energy towards the evangelization of the poor.*"

USE OF THE INSTRUCTION

Copies of the Instruction have reached the provinces. What use ought we make of this document?

Today at one and the same time we have before us an opportunity and a danger. Numerous wonderful ecclesial and congregational documents are available to us but we are regularly tempted not to read or take them into account.

It has been said that in the years following Vatican II the Vows of the Congregation of the Mission, in spite of the boom in Vincentian publications, have not enjoyed as much good press as e.g., the Five Virtues and other parts of our spirituality. For this alone they deserve special treatment. When all is said and done, the Vows are part of our spirituality from the very beginnings of the Congregation.

Father General in his introductory letter asks the Visitors to send a copy of the Instruction to each confrere. It would also be advantageous, as the General continues, for all of us to adopt the attitude of humble and receptive listeners; that we feel the need to discover again the freshness and value of the Evangelical Councils and the four vows, to preserve fidelity to the

words spoken to the Lord and to the poor. Finally, it would be good to remove the obstacles that impede us from en fleshing the spirituality of the vows in our own personal and communal worlds. The publication of the Instruction offers us the opportunity to initiate a special time of renewal. In my opinion, we should take advantage of the Instruction to give new impulse in the next few years to reflection on the Vows of the Congregation of the Mission.

In a particular way the Instruction should be studied in internal seminaries and theologates of the different provinces. It is of special interest to formators and those to be formed.

Allow me, in conclusion, to make two observations. The Instruction attempts always to be faithful to the Gospel and to the Vincentian tradition, without ignoring or lacking attention to messages coming from culture. It corresponds to the confreres, however, in different parts of the world to continue their reflection on the vows in harmony with the particular cultural context and in favor of true and efficient inculturation.

The Instruction appears at the moment in three languages. It is desirable that the Conferences of Visitors, or each Visitor in particular, commit to the different language translations, e.g., Portuguese, Italian, Polish, German, Slovakian, Hungarian, etc.

(Translator: James E. Claffey, C.M.)