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The Moderator of Vincentian Movements

Lauro Palú, C.M.

The initial inspiration for those of us who work as Moderators of the lay movements known today as Vincentian comes directly from St. Vincent and St. Louise.(1) After beginning the Confraternities of Charity (we know there were many of these: of women, of men, and mixed), St. Vincent drew up their rule. The Missioners were supposed to establish new "Charities" where ever they preached a mission or undertook any other work. St. Vincent specifically formed St. Louise to be the first "moderator" or adviser of the Charities, as well as their animator and formator.

St. Vincent was a practical man. He always asked for lists of the names of the truly needy; he wanted to know the cost of items in every region; he would specify that meat should be cut into small pieces for the sick who were toothless; a thousand small details which revealed the intensity of his love for the poor. (It seems to me that in the richness of these practical details we can discern the influence of Vincent's collaborators, especially of St. Louise.) He was a man of faith, inspired by the Gospel, the person, the words, the actions, of Jesus Christ. The poor must be served with kindness, meekness, cordiality, patience, endearment, respect, devotion. He spoke of the poor as being sacraments of Christ: we must see Jesus Christ in the poor. He used to say that the poor are our lords and masters (to the Daughters of Charity, their *owners*). He often said the poor must be seen through the eyes of Jesus Christ, such was his regard for them. He said that in order to do the things of Christ we must put on his spirit, that the Congregation would be capable of all things if animated by the spirit of God; that we must act in conformity with the mind of Christ, etc. As a true prophet, St. Vincent *denounced* the evils the poor were subject to, proclaiming their dignity and God's plan to save them through Jesus Christ; and he achieved great changes in favor of the poor.

St. Vincent was an extraordinary organizer, attentive always to those details which would assure the proper functioning of his projects, as well as their continuity and development over long time periods. He based all on personal contact with the poor and his love for them, and in this way inspired his collaborators.

Fleeing from scheming clericalism, St. Vincent learned to count on the laity, whom he knew how to recruit, form, and then send out to the most needy, wherever they could be found, wherever they would hide. He knew especially how to entrust women with real social and ecclesiastical responsibilities which required special tact. Aware of the evangelical potency of the poor, he was able to awaken this talent in the ones he chose for service to the poor, so that they in turn could care for others both materially and spiritually, body and soul, individuals and families, in hospital and on returning to their homes, feeding them and providing them with needed agricultural implements. In this

corporal and spiritual aid, St. Vincent was certainly helped by the experience of the laity and especially of the Daughters of Charity. His evangelization was integral, reaching beyond simply announcing the Gospel and mere material assistance to become true human development. He used to tell the volunteers as well as the Daughters of Charity that by their goodness they were revealing the goodness of God (SV X, 924; IX, 241-242).

"Thus we see in St. Vincent the model adviser or Moderator a man who began with actual reality, the believer (priest) who sees Christ in the poor, who demands the utmost respect for the poor person, who never separates love of God from love of neighbor; the organizer who trusts completely the lay person, concretely, the woman; the man of practical talent who presents clearly the objectives and means for the confraternities, who seeks the integral development of a person, who communicates his own charism to all for the well-being of the poor. He teaches all this to St. Louise, his faithful, efficient collaborator, and to the Ladies of Charity, in his conferences and homilies." (Quevedo, Alvaro. Moderating the AIC. *CLAPVI* no. 59, 1988, p. 212)

Our Task: to Help the Vincentian Laity

Statute 7 of the Congregation says: "Lay associations founded by St. Vincent and those which are inspired by his spirit should *be of special concern to our members, since they have the right to our presence and to our support. Although all members should be willing to undertake this work, it is necessary for some to be more skilled in it. It is important that this animation have a spiritual, ecclesial, social, and civic dimension.*"

Here we see two complementary realities: the *rights* of the laity, our obligations towards them. The statute contains two directives for us: *some of us should specialize as Moderators of lay movements, and all should offer their aid, giving a Vincentian orientation to their spiritual, ecclesial, social, and civic dimensions.*

In a study on the *role of Vincentian Moderators today* (*CLAPVI*, year XXII, #93, 1996, p. 324-336) Fr. Antonio Elduayen develops the dimensions of our guidance: *Religious*: spiritual life, sacraments, liturgy; *Ecclesial*: union with and participation in the life and organic plan of the church (diocese, parish, allied groups); *Vincentian*: vocation and spirit, a sense of Vincentian, belonging to the Vincentian Family; *Marian*: Mary, invoked under the title "Miraculous," as mother, model, guide, and protectress; *Missionary*: to serve the new evangelization both as object and method; *Social*: integrating theological, assistential, developmental, and liberating charity (its political dimension: structures), to make the Gospel effective; *Organizational*: general objectives and procedures of the association, following its statutes.

Turning our attention to the Marian Youth movements: when I prepared this paper for the members of the Council I realized there are certain actions to be avoided, and others to be cultivated in the hearts of youth. What we must avoid: paternalism, overly strict direction. We can be proud of our young people for their goodness, but we must not treat them, even though they captivate us, as trained pets who will dance when we want them to. What must be cultivated in our dealings with youth, those dimensions on which we must insist, are prayer, spiritual direction, proper values, vocational option, team work. These aspects are presented to the national associations in the text of the international statutes which the Superior General is sending to them, and are found in the "End" of the Association (Art. 9).

Autonomy of Vincentian lay movements

Our relations with the *Daughters of Charity* are regulated by constitutional guide lines. Those of the Daughters say: "Since its origin, the Company has willed to be subject to the authority of the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission, the successor of St. Vincent De Paul. He has over the Company the double power, dominative and jurisdictional, recognized by the Church and by the Constitutions. The Daughters of Charity acknowledge and accept him as God's representative, the one who helps them maintain their characteristic spirit and to carry out their mission in the Church" (3.27). "The Director General is a priest of the Congregation of the Mission appointed directly by the Superior General *ad nutum* to be his permanent representative for the Company.... He sees to it that the life of the sisters and their apostolic work are always fulfilled in fidelity to their vocation" (3.28).

These two quotes tell us that in our guidance of others we must help them to live the true charism of the Church. This is true, for example, with regard to the *Society of St. Vincent De Paul*, founded by Frederick Ozanam in 1833, a private association of the faithful, led and governed by laymen and recognized by the Holy See. It has no juridical link with the Congregation of the Mission. Nevertheless, there has always been a history of cordial cooperation between the two.

The juridical relationships of the *various Marian groups* with the Congregation are of several types. However, the Superior General is their Director General, according to the statutes of each group, and he names their National Director.

The Superior General is also Director General of all *Miraculous Medal Associations*.

The International Association of Charities, which gathers into one immense organism all the national associations of volunteers (formerly the Ladies of Charity), is a public association of Christian men and women, governed by its own rule and statutes,

within the framework of Canons 298-320. St. Vincent founded the association in 1617. In 1971 Fr. James Richardson, Superior General, renounced his juridical authority over said association on the international level, although retaining his role on national and local levels. The Association has an ecclesiastical assistant who is, by Canon 317, § 1, appointed by the Holy See, after consulting the international directorate of the Association. In choosing this Assistant (cf. Rule #3) the AIC presents several names to the Holy See, with the approval of the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission. The Assistants are chosen from among priests of the Congregation of the Mission. For the method of choosing Assistants on local, regional, and national levels, statutes must be consulted.

Role of the Moderator or Lay Movements

Although some confreres specialize in guiding lay movements, all of us, as Statute 7 tells us, should be willing to undertake this work, so I offer the following to all members of the Congregation. A Moderator, or advisor, is someone who accompanies another, who sits beside someone else. (This is clearer in the romance languages, where derivation from the Latin "ad sedere" is obvious. Translator's note.) There are two kinds of advise: one directive, the other more liberating. (We follow Fr. Quevedo's methodological suggestions here.) The first characterization can appear negative, but it is didactic, because of the clear opposition between the methods of advising. It does not always happen that this model is outmoded with the passage of time. Presenting the deficiencies of a practice is a way of correcting things that are not working well. Here are some guidelines for revising our work methods in general.

1. Directive moderator: In a clerical Church the Moderator was "director" who knew everything, and the laity mere "minors," dependent on the priest for everything. It was a pyramid, with priests, religious, bishops, and the Pope occupying the summit. The priest was responsible for everything; the laity passive. The director directed. He knew everything. So he taught. This clericalism is open to severe criticism for the consequences of its paternalism which depersonalized the laity, who were obliged to listen, to obey, to follow orders, without dialogue, without participation, without personal responsibility. Only the director's opinion was listened to, and imposed, with no importance given to the experience of the group. Often there were no apparent problems, simply because assignments, results, methods, the entire process, were not evaluated.

With such a work plan passivity is inevitable. Conscience is not awakened, reasoning is absent, individualism grows, and the group is not enriched because nothing is ever shared.

2. The non-directive moderator who liberates: Contrary to the above, a different type of guidance is possible, the fruit of a different vision of Church. Nowadays, in the ecclesiology of Vatican II, we talk of the "People of God," where all

are equal, even though we occupy different places and fulfill different tasks, while serving our brothers and sisters. We can no longer regard the laity only as objects of our zeal, of our direction, of our authority. As responsible, as are we, for their own lives and for their response to God, the laity should contribute in a mature responsible way, their personal charisma, experience, talents, ideas, and capacity to love and serve. St. Vincent said it: the poor evangelize us, they are our masters, we must go to their school (and attend their classes!). We cannot spend our time just teaching, but must be formed with the laity in the process of transforming society and the world.

This kind of direction is said to be liberating, because by stimulating active participation of a person and forming him or her towards more participation, it frees up the transforming potential which exists in all of us. Through participation one is enabled to progress from a state of ingenuous conscience to a critical conscience which attempts to know reality as it is, with its positive values and deficiencies, with the ambiguities found in other people, and the limitations of everything that surrounds us. With all these efforts to learn the reality of persons and participating in the processes in which we are involved, with openness to dialogue, reflection, and co-responsibility, each member is helped to form a consciousness of his own dignity and worth, strengthening himself to transform reality, and make a contribution towards the well-being of all, especially of the most handicapped and abandoned. Thus we can see how this type of guidance is best for our fundamental option for the poor.

Unctions and qualities of a moderator

1. Functions and job, or mission, of the moderator: The moderator of a Vincentian group must help its members live an experience of Church, to labor, inspired by the love of Jesus Christ for the poor, in favor of the most needy. This, in short, is the objective, style of life, and work of our Vincentian groups. The moderator, by his office, must help our groups to adopt a truly evangelical attitude towards the problems our poor face today. Based on the Gospel, on St. Vincent, and on the social teachings of the Church, the Moderator must see to it that these groups, inspired by our own charism, be formed and serve the poor apostolically. As moderator he must help a group grow by teaching them proper group procedures, which will also develop each individual member. His job, then, is to deal with the group as a unit and accompany them in their apostolic works.

Fr. Jaime Corera synthesizes the Vincentian spirituality which we transmit to the groups we work with thus: "In the spirituality or Christian spiritual vision proper to St. Vincent De Paul the lay person is called to live out his baptismal faith (his sanctity) by an active dedication to the corporal and spiritual redemption of the poor. This should be undertaken in union with others within an organized institution (confraternity,

association, or community) with a mode of action and a sensitivity which is simple, humble, and full of the charity of Christ himself" (*CLAPVI*, yr. XXII # 90-91, 1996, p. 54-63).

With necessary adaptations we can also apply to the Vincentian groups with whom we work the words of Claire Delva, ex-president of the AIC, and first organizer of the Volunteers of Charity on an international level, words she addressed to the Visitors in Bogota in 1983 and which indicate what the members of the AIC ask of us: "Be attentive to our efforts.

"Support and encourage us.

"Recognize our capabilities as responsible lay women.

"Accept the worth of our association on national and international levels, as well as our own identity and our autonomy among other organizations dedicated to charity and assistance. "Collaborate with us on all levels, laity and clerics cooperating in joint responsibility." To these words Claire Delva added, in the name of all the Volunteers of the world: "We also commit ourselves to all this" (Cf. Quevedo, *op. cit.* p. 219).

Quoting again from the proposed Statutes being drawn up by the Superior General, we read:

"In order to attain its objectives the Association puts at the disposition of its members all the means it judges convenient:

- a) *it encourages the interiorization of the Word of God and celebrates it, valuing group prayer and the liturgy because Christ makes himself present in the word, in the Eucharist and in those who pray together;*
- b) *it offers a catechetical formation process for maturing in faith _ a process of catechumenal inspiration which has its stages, its objectives and its activities;*
- c) *it makes known to the members what Holy Scripture and the Church say in regard to the Virgin;*
- d) *it promotes the knowledge of St. Vincent, St. Louise, St. Catherine and other witnesses of the Church who lived the Gospel in giving themselves to charity;*
- e) *it offers the members the possibility of serving the poor;*
- f) *it promotes study sessions, a school for catechists, congresses, assemblies, publications and other instruments of pastoral and social communication (Art. 11).*

The place of the Moderator is, of course, wherever these formation activities take place, to animate them or to be part of the formation team. And rather than just "laying down conditions," he should work with the young people "to create the conditions." This is a concise description of the job and method of work of the Moderator.

2. Qualities of a moderator: We enjoy no monopoly on moderating Vincentian lay groups or Volunteers of Charity. But we are actually more consulted than others, and are frequently asked to help form new Moderators, be they sisters or laity. The qualities we should personally cultivate in our hearts to fulfill this task are the following:

a) We must be people of faith, well-disposed to communicate to others the zeal which consumes us.

b) To be Moderators we must be able to stimulate growth in individuals and groups, and not continually criticizing errors and minimal defects. We have to discover the good in each process, support indications of good will, prepare for the future with patience and prepare our tasks optimistically and courageously. It is not just a question of teaching the works of St. Vincent, but of communicating his spirit of transformation of life

c) In order to animate the laity who work with the poor and handicapped, we must know how to communicate a positive, joyful, and hopeful message that we are the bearers of God's love to the lost and abandoned. St. Vincent used to say: "We must proclaim that the Kingdom of God is for the poor. Do it like the women the Risen Lord sent to announce to the apostles his victory over death, sin, and all evil."

d) Inspired by St. Vincent, living his charism in an apostolic spirituality committed to the poor, we must labor as the Church asks, promoting justice in our own spirit of "simple, cordial, humble love, a love that takes risks, an inventive love" (Basic doc: AIC).

e) In order to help the laity to interpret the signs of the times in the light of Christ and the Gospel (not in the light of television!), we need the gift of discernment. We find through contact with the Word of God, read through the eyes of the poor, in the Bible, and in daily life.

f) A Moderator must cultivate good human relations, with fraternity, Christian friendship, united in loving and serving the Vincentian Family.

"In meetings between Moderators and lay Vincentians requests such as these are frequently heard: We lay Vincentians want Moderators with attitudes of service, friendship, accompaniment, sincerity, justice; who show enthusiasm, who stimulate us, who help us grow in responsibility, in Christian and Vincentian life, who make us feel more secure in being with Jesus as we serve our oppressed and abandoned brothers and sisters" (Quevedo: *op.cit.* p. 220).

Sometimes we may think that such a way of presenting a list of qualities does not take into account a personal reality: that all of us are not so gifted. Actually we cannot expect the Moderator to be a superman with no defects, and blessed with all the gifts of nature and grace. A generous good will is sufficient, plus untiring effort, the capacity to evaluate and change attitudes, courage to recognize our limitations and consequently to improve our participation, and above all good preparation of our activities and tasks.

Reality of lay help in the provinces

The Preparatory Commission for the General Assembly of 1998 has synthesized the replies of the Provinces to the Superior General's questionnaire on the theme of the Assembly: *The worldwide Vincentian Family and the challenges of the mission in the third millennium*. Twenty-one Provinces said we must get to know one another, to coordinate, and to collaborate. Sixteen ask that it be made clear what it is that unites us as a Vincentian Family with Vincentian spirituality. Twelve desire help in the formation and animation of Vincentian family groups. Three want structures for coordination to be created. Four say we ought to offer mutual spiritual assistance.

As to unity and cooperation among the different branches of the Vincentian Family, the answers were not always clear. I had hoped, for example, for more cooperation *between ourselves and the Daughters of Charity*. But only five provinces indicated a high level of cooperation. In fifteen provinces a good level exists. For six, a satisfactory level (one Missioner is their Director, a few help with spiritual direction, retreats, and confessions). Ten provinces offer sporadic cooperation; none in two provinces, and in another some cooperation which does not amount to cooperation. One province cooperates but there is no common project. Another indicates the need for new forms of cooperation based on equality.

Between the missioners and the AIC: Good cooperation exists in six provinces. In nine provinces some missioners who are already counselors or Moderators of Volunteers, are interested. Seventeen provinces are commencing collaboration. And in eleven more there are no Volunteers; or if there are we do not assist them.

The Congregation and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul: In fourteen provinces one or more confreres participate as Moderators and active members of the Society and work in common projects. Nine have good relations on a general level and desire to increase collaboration. Sixteen have slight relations; five none at all. In one province the Society does not exist.

Between Confreres and Marian Associations: (Vincentian Marian Youth, the Marian Movement, Children of Mary, etc.) Good relations exist in ten provinces, where confreres are directors and animators. Six provinces have intermittent, insufficient relations with little enthusiasm. Four are beginning Marian Youth groups. In four others there are groups, but they are animated by the Daughters, not by us. Twenty-one provinces have no Marian Youth groups. However, in all provinces there are youth groups, but none with a distinct Vincentian character.

Between Confreres and Miraculous Medal Associations: Twenty-nine provinces have no Miraculous Medal Associations. In seventeen there is a devotional relationship (novenas, etc.). Some publish bulletins for their associates. Relations between confreres and Miraculous Medal Associations are almost always informal and anonymous. Some countries are the exception, where associations with definite objectives and organized structures exist.

Between the Congregation and other groups of the extended Vincentian Family: There is some contact and active collaboration in twenty-one provinces. Of these only two indicate a dynamic relationship. In the rest it comes down to occasional liturgical celebrations. Twenty-four report that, if there are Vincentian groups they barely maintain contact.

Among the Vincentian Groups themselves: If these have any mutual contact eleven provinces are not aware of it. Twenty-six report no coordination among groups, or that it is insufficient; just an occasional festive occasion. Five provinces are attempting to bring about some effective coordination. Three hold formation encounters for the groups.

Liturgical celebrations have been mentioned frequently. I think this refers to the day of prayer celebrated in September, 1996, coordinated by the four persons responsible for the international branches of the family, a clear sign that once started, a good thing keeps moving.

We must give an answer to the Lord and to our brothers and sisters of the family, as well as to all the poor, that we are disposed to do anything necessary to achieve unity and, as the Volunteers say, "Against poverty we work together!"

At the conclusion of a meeting in Guatemala among our Latin American Provinces, on the theme: St. Vincent and today's Laity, the priests and sisters present committed themselves as follows:

1. We recognize the need of a better systematic formation in order to know the different Vincentian Associations; this must begin in our seminaries and continue as ongoing formation.

2. To develop the proposals of *CLAPVI* (396) we need to undertake more seriously, responsibly, and humbly, our role as Moderators, always respecting the identity of each group.

3. United we support the integration of the Vincentian Family, evaluating the work accomplished by the movements. To accomplish this an organization must be set up in each country to program the works (*CLAPVI*, XXII, 1996 # 20).

1. I will use above all the word “assessor”, though in some countries this person is also called “counsellor,” “ecclesiastical assistant,” “animator,” etc. The person and the work of the assessor are described in various articles of confreres who work or had worked in this ministry.

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Asesor de las Voluntarias de la Caridad, manuscript. Quevedo, Alvaro. “Asesoría en la AIC,” in *CLAPVI*, vol. XIV, n. 59, 1988; pp. 210-220. Salamanca, Francisco.

“San Vicente, asesor de laicos,” in *CLAPVI*, vol. XXII, n. 90-91, 1996; pp. 21-28. In this presentation, I am following above all the ideas and proposals of Fr. Alvaro Quevedo.