



Vincentiana

Volume 46
Number 3 *Vol. 46, No. 3*


Article 18

5-2002

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Recommended Citation

Fernández de Mendoza, Ignacio C.M. (2002) "The Theological Dimension of Community Life," *Vincentiana*: Vol. 46 : No. 3 , Article 18.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentiana/vol46/iss3/18>

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The Theological Dimension of Community Life

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Vicar General

8.VI.2001

The Church has a long tradition with many different types of community life. The varied experiences of life in common usually coincide in one fundamental element: all propose as a first objective the perfection of their members, while at the same time insisting on one or another particular end and on some characteristic virtues of the Institute. After the Protestant Reformation diverse traditional forms of community life continued to flourish, without stifling the appearance of new types, among which is found the Vincentian mode of community life. When St. Vincent designed the community of his missionaries he was not starting from zero. He implanted the elements needed from the diverse traditions of the common life: monastic, mendicant, and Jesuit, while adding at the same time original Vincentian elements. Thus the community life of the Congregation of the Mission would evolve in the function of the Mission, which is none other than the evangelization of the Poor. Missioners living in community would be contemplatives in action and apostles in prayer.

1. Theological support of the Vincentian community

St. Vincent made use of, as we have said, elements referring to the common life already practiced in the traditions and constitutional texts of past and contemporary religious orders. Not satisfied with what he received from outside sources, he went a step farther to base the community life of his missionaries on solid theological foundations. To this end, he looked to the Word of God, and very particularly to the example and teachings of Jesus Christ. It is well-known that the imitation of Christ is a fundamental part of Vincentian spirituality. Imitation of the earthly Christ, even in insignificant details, offers Vincent de Paul doctrinal security even in those moments of making decisions in regard to practical living. St. Vincent would say “Christ’s teaching will never let us down,” (CR II, 1) and that “Jesus Christ is the true model and invisible guide on whom we must base our actions” (SV XI, 212). He would frequently invite the missionaries to evaluate the practices and deeds of the ancient religious orders in regard to their common life, especially when these were based on the teachings of God’s Word and the example of Jesus Christ and the early Christians.

It is here that St. Vincent finds authentic examples of community life of missionaries. Our Holy Founder, in his conferences, alludes to the Most Holy Trinity as the exemplary cause of community life in the community formed by

Jesus and his disciples, which brought about the common life of the first Christian churches. St. Vincent saw in these biblical revelations a solid theological basis on which to rest the community life of the C.M.

2. Communities based on the example of the Trinity

St. Vincent reminds us that “according to the Bull which established our Congregation, we are bound to honor in a special way the Most Holy Trinity and the Incarnation, mysteries beyond words” (CR X, 2). St. Vincent has frequent recourse to these two mysteries to draw out lessons and motivations of different types. For St. Vincent, the community life of the missionaries has its roots and basic reason for existence in the Holy Trinity. It was not in vain that God Three in One created all things and particularly the noblest among these: the human being, created in the image and likeness of God Three in One, which is to say, of God-Community of persons. A human being could not be realized except in relation to others, never separated from others. It behooves man, and in particular the Vincentian missionary, to live and relate to others in the image of the Trinity.

In contemplating the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity, St. Vincent notes some practical applications for the common life. God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in perfect communion and reciprocity. As a consequence, the community of Vincentian missionaries must develop in a perfect communion of life and action. Remarking on the common life, Vincent would say, “God is One and in God there are three persons, without the Father being greater than the Son, nor the Son superior to the Holy Spirit” (SV XIII, 633). Thus, the missionaries, even when they are of great number, will nevertheless be of one heart and one soul.

God is a union of three persons from all eternity, now and forever, without limits of time, a union that perdures. Consequently, the community of missionaries will be an uninterrupted union, in every place and at every moment. Each of the three persons of the Blessed Trinity participates in the life of God. In the light of this principle, the community of missionaries must accept the value of participation and co-responsibility. Trinitarian love is altruistic and generous, not possessive or selfish, lived among equals. So the Vincentian community will accept members who are basically equal in dignity, removed from manipulation and domination of some over others. To short, according to St. Vincent, the Vincentian community will be inspired by, and find an unmistakable model in, the common life of the Most Holy Trinity. Remarking on this concept in the conference of 23 May 1659, the saint told the missionaries: “Let us hold onto this spirit if we desire to be an image of the adorable Trinity, if we wish to maintain a holy union with the Father, with the Son, and with the Holy Spirit. What is it that creates that unity, that intimacy in God but the equality and distinction of the three persons?” (SV XII, 256-257).

On another occasion St. Vincent invoked the Most Holy Trinity as the foundation of the charitable mission of the Vincentian community. To this end he addressed the Daughters of Charity: “it would please me to see that the sisters, in this, be in conformity with the Most Holy Trinity: so just as the Father surrenders totally to the Son, and the Son totally to the Father, from which proceeds the Holy Spirit, in the same way the sisters would be totally one in producing works of charity ... just like the Holy Trinity” (SV XIII, 633). In this way, according to St. Vincent, the Vincentian community must encourage imitation of the Trinity of God in a communion of love, for only thus will burgeon its proper mission which is nothing more than the compassionate love of neighbor.

Summing up, St. Vincent, following criteria of faith, sees in the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity a truly exemplary source of the common life of the missionaries. Our Constitutions, keeping in mind the thought of St. Vincent, remind us that: “The Church finds the ultimate source of its life and action in the Trinity. The Congregation, within the Church, does the same” (C 20).

3. Community of Jesus with the apostles and the Vincentian Community

Israel, with the passage of time, developed a conscience and certain customs of community life. This conscience was expressed through a popular terminology: chosen people, priestly people and the rest of Israel. At the time of Jesus, there existed two contrary concepts of community. One part, naturally, was the united and close people of Israel, and the other was the people divided because of the influence of foreign powers. At the same time, autonomous and dissident groups arose: Samaritans, the monks of Qumran, and the group of John the Baptist. Jesus knew intimately and above all related with the group of John the Baptist.

a. Jesus forms his own community

The time came when Jesus broke with John the Baptist and formed his own community, a community with a particular tone and customs. Jesus, far from being an anchorite, preached the Beatitudes, sought relationships with people, and in general announced a joyful and liberating message. This announcement attracted a group of hearers disposed to follow him closely and to form a community in the strict sense of the word. The original nucleus was formed of the Twelve and in some way of a few others who, without pertaining to the Twelve, resembled them in their lifestyle. With all these Jesus formed a stable and itinerant community. It was different in that those who accepted Jesus’ message continued to live in their respective dwellings.

b. Features of Jesus' group

According to gospel tradition, this group had some characteristic traits. First of all, the Apostles adhered to the person of Jesus, preferring him to any other family tie. It was an adhesion that continued to be purified and grew in authenticity as time passed. Another trait of the community of Jesus and the Apostles was its constant and explicit reference to God the Father. Jesus mentioned his Father continually and directed his prayer to him. In this way Jesus created a religious climate based on daily prayer to a provident and loving Father.

A third element enriched the community of Jesus and the Twelve: fraternity. Relationship within the group was not easy, given the variety of origins, temperaments, mentalities, and the personal aspirations of each one. Jesus accepted the Apostles as they were, with their differences, so he could remodel their souls and lead them slowly in communitarian and fraternal growth. Jesus respected the Apostles especially when they were experiencing group or personal problems. By personal example and his word he sowed new values in the group: fraternal love expressed in attitudes of service, personal and group humility, gratitude in mutual relationships, the significance of the cross, and confidence in God's Providence.

Another characteristic of the community of Jesus was its openness to mission. It was always ready for mission. It was not a closed ghetto. The community of Jesus and the populace met continually. Jesus and the Twelve traveled the roads of Palestine, entered the towns, and visited the synagogues. Jesus missioned personally in his free moments and at the same time sent his companions to mission to everyone without distinction. Jesus and his disciples used to go to Jerusalem to celebrate religious feasts. Even before the oft-repeated temptation of the setting up of three tents, Jesus invited his disciples to open themselves to the four corners of the world. The community of Jesus and the Twelve was not an end in itself. The final outcome was that Jesus animated a community for the mission.

c. Community and the Paschal Mystery

Jesus and his community had some difficult moments. Many biblical scholars mention the crisis of Galilee (Jn 6:66-71) when not a few followers abandoned Jesus. But the real trial came with the persecution and Jesus' condemnation to death. In spite of their community experience at Jesus' side, the Twelve as a group crumbled: one betrayed Jesus, another denied him, the rest fled, and the group broke up. But in spite of this the seed sown by Jesus had not fallen on useless ground. Their encounter with the Resurrected Lord reunited the community, and they went forth together giving testimony to the resurrection.

d. Application to the Vincentian community

The community formed by Jesus and the Twelve is a perfect model of the Vincentian community. According to St. Vincent the members of the missionary community should be guided by the teachings and dynamisms proper to the community of Jesus and the Twelve. The Vincentian community will be all the more authentic as it more closely resembles the community of Jesus and his companions. On 14 November 1659, St. Vincent addressed the missionaries: “I beg the company to praise God and to thank him for having placed us in the same state as his Son and the Apostles” (SV XII, 385). Our present Constitutions sum up the thought of St. Vincent in these words: the missionaries of the C.M. “follow Christ who called apostles and disciples and shared a fraternal life with them to evangelize the poor” (C 20, 2°).

4. The first Christian communities and the Vincentian Community

In a conference on Poverty, 6 August 1655, St. Vincent said to the missionaries: “What a blessing for the Mission to be able to imitate the first Christians, to live like them in common and in poverty! Oh Savior! Such an advantage for us! Let us beg God that in his mercy he grant us this spirit of poverty” (SV XI, 226). In the same conference our Holy Founder praises the common life of the first Christian communities, as well as mentioning some of their special qualities, such as the community of goods.

On 23 May 1659, St. Vincent quoted two biblical passages to the missionaries of Saint Lazare: “that with one accord you may with one voice glorify God the Father (Rom 15:6); “complete my joy by being of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing” (Phil. 2:2). And following this allusion to the Word of God, the saint concludes: “We must pray God that he make us all like the first Christians, of one heart and one soul” (SV XII, 249).

The first communities according to Acts

The book of Acts recounts the history of the expansion of the Word of God and the creation of new communities following the death and resurrection of the Lord. It was the followers of Jesus, changed by their Paschal experience, who formed these first communities. The spirit of the Risen Lord and the conviction that he lived and was the Messiah brought them to a new type of life. These first communities welcomed the Twelve, some relatives of Jesus, an undetermined group of former followers of Jesus, and some others who felt attracted by the example of the common life of the Christians. The first communities were open, little by little more complex, and in a constant process of differentiation from official Judaism.

In the Acts of the Apostles we find many examples of model Christian communities, fruit in good measure of historical recollection, and also partly from the tendency towards idealization. We refer to Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35; and 5:12-16. St. Luke states that those who were baptized: “devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. ...All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one’s need. ...praising God and enjoying favor with all the people. And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved” (Acts 2:42-47).

In these verses St. Luke summarily describes the life of the first Christian communities of Jerusalem and its surroundings, while at the same time he presents a valid model of the common life for the Church, and of course for the Vincentian community. The characteristic qualities of the first Christian communities are clearly shown in the quoted text:

- The members of the communities were moved to meet because of strong experiences of faith.
- The proclamation of the gospel by the Apostles was listened to with attention by both the baptized and the catechumens.
- Fraternal unity was manifested by the sharing of goods with the needy.
- Frequent shared prayer was part of their common life.
- The community met to celebrate the breaking of bread.
- The community was not elitist, opening its door to all without distinction.

Twenty centuries have passed since St. Luke penned the passage on which we have commented. Vincentians, beginning with St. Vincent, have always seen in these pages of Acts a model of community life. The Vincentian community will be authentic insofar as it is motivated by faith, shared by members of the community, in fraternal communion among all the confreres, in offering disinterested service and in sharing goods with the needy both within and outside the community, in prayer that, according to St. Vincent, “gives strength that animates us to serve God and the neighbor” (SV XI, 409).

The Vincentian community will be authentic if it breaks the Eucharistic bread together, since at the beginning and now the Eucharist is the source of community life and the inspiration of apostolic initiatives; it supports a

community that is open to mission, being itself a personal and communitary experience of the Resurrected Jesus.

St. Vincent reasoned that all the ingredients which nourished the life of the first Christian communities nourished also the life of the Vincentian communities. For this reason he pronounced the words, already quoted: “What a blessing for the Mission to be able to imitate the first Christians and live like them!” (SV XI, 226). Our present Constitutions take it for granted that at the beginning of the third millennium the missionaries of the C.M. will organize communities similar to those of the first Christians: “Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we build up a unity among ourselves to achieve our mission, and so offer credible witness to Christ the Savior” (C 20, 3°).

5. Conclusion

St. Vincent desired that the community life of the C.M. rest upon firm foundations. He found these bases in the Word of God, particularly in three theological sources or paradigms: the Holy Trinity, the community of Jesus and his disciples, and the first Christian communities. At the present time, without ignoring the contributions of human sciences that refer to community living, we believe that an attentive and faith-filled reading of the Word of God, guided by teachings and orientations, continues to be the heart and soul of Vincentian community life.

(JOHN KENNEDY, C.M., translator)