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Douglas Slawson C.M.

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Vincent de Paul's View of Common Life in the Congregation of the Mission

BY
DOUGLAS SLAWSON

The 1984 Constitutions define the Congregation of the Mission as "a clerical society of the apostolic life" which leads "a life in common" in a way proper to it. "Saint Vincent," they continue, "gathered the confreres together within the church so that, living a new form of community life, they might undertake the evangelization of the poor. Consequently, the Vincentian community is organized to prepare for apostolic activity and to foster and promote it continually."¹ In other words, community life is not an end in itself but a means to an end: the evangelization of the poor. This is faithful to the saint's vision. The purpose of the Congregation, as he saw it, was to continue the mission of Jesus and the apostles. "The state of a missionary," he declared in an undated conference, "is one of conformity with the gospel maxims; it consists in leaving and abandoning all things, as the apostles did, in order to follow Jesus Christ and, in imitation of him, to do all that is becoming. . . . Nothing is more Christlike than to go from village to village to help poor people work out their salvation."²

This passage contained in a nutshell Vincent's understanding of community. Suggested by the collective term "apostles" was the common life the twelve lived with the Lord, which consisted in the practice of the evangelical maxims. The latter corresponded, not with the vows of the Congregation, but with the virtues. Just as the disciples gave up home and possessions to gather with Jesus, so too did the followers of Vincent. The aim in both instances was to participate in the Lord's ministry, that of itinerant preaching to the rural poor. Thus, the apostolate stood at the center of common life and was supported by the practice of

¹*Constitutions and Statutes of the Congregation of the Mission* (Rome, 1984), nn. 3 and 19.

²Extract of a conference on the vocation of a missionary, undated, *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, entretiens, documents*, ed. Pierre Coste, C.M., 14 vols. (Paris: 1920-1926), 11:1. Herein-after cited as *CED*.

poverty and the virtues. The following pages will examine the relationship between work and community in the mind of Vincent.

His first contact with what became the apostolate of the Congregation—the preaching of missions to country folk—showed him that he could not do the work alone. The saint’s initial effort at Folleville in 1617 proved so successful that he had to summon the Jesuits from Amiens to help with the flood of confessions.³ In the years that followed, he continued to give missions with the aid of whatever priests were available. When his patrons, Philippe-Emmanuel and Françoise Marguerite de Gondi, sought to institutionalize the work, they could find no religious order willing to undertake it and so asked Vincent to establish a community to carry it out.⁴ Thus, the apostolate called into existence the Congregation of the Mission, a society of priests devoted to the communal fulfillment of evangelization. For the saint, as Jean-François Gaziello, C.M., has observed, this task was not personal; it was joint, based on the example of Jesus and the twelve.⁵

As Vincent saw it, two pillars supported the common apostolate. The first was poverty, and the second, the practice of virtue. The latter stood at the head of the *Common Rules*, published in 1658 after decades of lived experience. The Rules noted that Jesus, who came into the world to save mankind, “began to do and to teach.” He fulfilled the first, “when He perfectly reduced to practice every kind of virtue; and the second, when He preached the gospel to the poor.” Members of the Congregation were to do the same: “To strive for [their] own perfection by exerting every effort to practice the virtues . . . [and] to preach the gospel to the poor.”⁶ The saint devoted the entire second chapter of the Rules to this cardinal point—the cultivation of virtues, or evangelical maxims as he called them. These included the pursuit of the kingdom of God, the performance of the divine will in all things, and the exercise of simplicity, prudence, humility, zeal, mortification, indifference, uniformity, and fraternal charity.⁷

Communal life served as the school within which these virtues were learned and developed. “Although we are not members of a

³Extract of a conference on the mission preached at Folleville in 1617, *CED*, 11:4.

⁴Pierre Coste, *Life and Works of Saint Vincent de Paul*, 3 vols., trans. Joseph Leonard, C.M. (Brooklyn: 1987), 1:95-114 and 144-48.

⁵Jean-François Gaziello, C.M., “La Communauté selon Saint Vincent,” *Vincentiana* 28 (1984):617. See also *Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission* (Perryville, Missouri: 1974), 1:2.

⁶*Common Rules*, 1:1.

⁷*Ibid.*, 2:1-14.

religious order," Vincent told Jane Frances de Chantal, "we . . . try to live in a religious manner." He went on to describe the Congregation's daily schedule which bespoke the commitment to holiness. Confreres rose at 4:00 A.M. and made an hour's meditation, followed by office and mass. They studied until 10:30 when there was "a particular examination of conscience on the virtue we are trying to acquire." Lunch was served with reading at table; recreation was permitted for an hour after the meal. All returned to their rooms for quiet time, followed by vespers and compline at 2:00 P.M. Having finished prayers, members studied again until 5:00 when matins and lauds were recited, and a second particular examination of conscience took place. Then came supper and recreation, followed immediately by a general examination of conscience and night prayers. Confreres returned to their rooms and retired at 9:00. Every Friday morning they held a chapter of faults and in the evening had "a conference on our rules and the practice of the virtues." During the latter, said Vincent, "everyone there shares the thoughts our Lord gave him in prayer on the topic being discussed." As a rule, conversation was permitted only during recreation. The same routine was also followed on the missions, except that confessions substituted for study time.⁸

The entire order of the day was geared to the practice of virtue. It began with meditation which, in Vincent's view, aimed at helping one embrace a virtue or avoid a vice. True mental prayer issued in action, in effective love for God and neighbor.⁹ The two examinations of conscience dealt with the particular virtue one was trying to acquire. Study time included the devout reading of Sacred Scripture. Considering the New Testament as "the rule of Christian perfection," Vincent urged the confreres "to practice the precepts or counsels set down" in it and to imitate "the example of the virtues found therein."¹⁰ The weekly chapter of faults (a public confession of transgressions against the community) offered collective negative reinforcement to wrongdoing. The weekly conference, on the other hand, provided communal positive reinforcement in the life of holiness. Vincent considered such fraternal support paramount. By 1648 the confreres also held repetition

⁸Vincent de Paul to Jane Frances de Chantal, 14 July 1639, *CED*, 1:563-64.

⁹Conference on rising, prayer, examen, and other exercises, 17 November 1658, *CED*, 10:591; extract of a conference on prayer, undated, *ibid.*, 11:84; repetition of prayer, 16 August 1655, *ibid.*, 11:253; conference on the spirit of the Company (Daughters of Charity), 9 February 1653, *ibid.*, 9:592-93; extract of a conference on the love of God, undated, *ibid.*, 11:40.

¹⁰*Common Rules*, 10:8.

of prayer (that is, an open exchange of the thoughts received in meditation) every second or third day, a practice he regarded as “one of the most necessary means we have for mutually rousing our devotion.”¹¹

The second pillar of communal life was poverty: the abandonment of everything to come together and, like the twelve, follow Christ the missionary. The need for mobility first brought this into focus. In 1628 when Vincent sought papal approval of the Congregation, he told the pontiff that the first confreres, “in order to devote themselves more easily and effectively to the salvation of the poor country people, . . . left the benefices which some of them were enjoying and others the offices which detained them in the cities.” They not only forsook current prebends but also forswore acquiring any in the future.¹² If one was to go from village to village preaching the good news, one must be free of obligations.

If a missionary was to persevere in his vocation, he must be completely detached from temporal goods. Village life was dirty and austere. Most homes had only one room, often shared by family and livestock. Floors were earthen and furnishings sparse. Daily fare consisted of a monotonous diet of boiled millet.¹³ Because a missionary shared these conditions, his labor was arduous and uncomfortable. In the villages of Picardy, for instance, he had only straw for a bed.¹⁴ “It is extremely difficult,” declared Vincent,

nay, even impossible for a person whose mind is bruised with the desire of acquiring earthly goods to fulfill his obligations among us, to live according to the rule he has embraced, and to follow the ordinary routine of the Company. And how can a man who thinks only of his pleasures, of having a good time, of good eating and drinking . . . carry out exactly the functions of the Congregation of the Mission? . . . Has he to go on a mission? The mission is in a village where there will be none but poor peasants and simple-minded women. Oh! This gentleman does not want to go there. If he thinks he is going to be asked, he provides himself with a budget of excuses; he never fails to have a supply, and a poor superior is obliged to accept them with a groan. What can he do? But if it is an important mission in which he will find something to satisfy his vanity,

¹¹Conference on moral theology, preaching, catechizing, and the administration of the sacraments, 6 August 1659, *CED*, 12:288; conference on prayer, 31 May 1648, *ibid.*, 9:421.

¹²Vincent de Paul et al. to Urban VIII, June 1628, *CED*, 1:58.

¹³Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century*, 3 vols., trans. Sian Reynolds (New York: 1985), vol. 1: *The Structures of Everyday Life: The Limits of Possibilities*, 187-88, 275-77, 283; conference on the virtues of Marguerite Naseau, July 1642, *CED*, 9:84.

¹⁴Extract of a conference on the vocation of a missionary, undated, *CED*, 11:1.

there is your man! He seeks for it eagerly; he asks to go; he does all that he can directly or indirectly to be sent to it. . . . Oh Savior! Is that being a missionary? This is a devil, not a missionary. His spirit is the spirit of the world. He is already in the world in his heart and affections, and his carcass is in the Congregation.¹⁵

These were strong words but give a clear indication of Vincent's thinking on the matter. Poverty was necessary for the freedom to perform and persevere in the apostolate.

It had a more attractive side, too, at least in the spiritual sense. Vincent believed that to become poor to follow Christ was to become a true Christian. Poverty and Christianity were interchangeable. "Many in the Company," he told the confreres, "have left their parishes to come and live here in a state of poverty and, consequently, in the state of Christians."¹⁶ The saint relished this idea because it made the Congregation resemble the church described in the Acts of the Apostles, something he sought to foster. "Like the first Christians," he wrote in the *Common Rules*, "all things are to be possessed in common among us, and are to be distributed to each one . . . according to his need."¹⁷

Just as poverty and a community of goods were necessary for promoting the apostolate, so too was unanimity of spirit. During a mission, which usually lasted three to six weeks, community life took to the road. It had a certain witness value. Because the missionary's task, in addition to preaching and catechizing, included the reconciliation of enemies and the healing of divisions, any discord among the confreres might undermine their work.¹⁸ They had to practice what they taught. Vincent became aware of this very early. In 1631 he brought it to the attention of Antoine Portail who was giving a mission in Cevennes with Antoine Lucas. "I am hoping," said the saint, "for much fruit from on high . . . if union, cordiality, and support exist between you two. In the name of God, Monsieur, let this be your principal practice. . . . Bear with everything, I say, everything on the part of good M. Lucas . . . so that . . . you may adapt yourself to him in charity. . . . Above all, let there appear no sign of division between you. You are, as it were, on a stage upon which one act of bitterness is capable of spoiling everything."¹⁹

¹⁵Conference on poverty, 13 August 1655, *CED*, 11:237 and 240. See also the extract of a conference on the attachment to temporal goods, undated, *ibid.*, 79.

¹⁶Conference on poverty, 16 and 23 October 1654, *CED*, 11:163.

¹⁷*Common Rules*, 3:3.

¹⁸Vincent de Paul et al. to Urban VIII, June 1628, *CED*, 1:58; Vincent de Paul to Jane Frances de Chantal, 14 July 1639, *ibid.*, 1:562.

¹⁹Vincent de Paul to Antoine Portail, 21 June 1631, I 1:112-13.

The communal life, even between two, was to serve as a model of Christian living for the parish community. Any rift might ruin a mission. To ensure that this did not happen, Vincent urged the confreres to uniformity, forbearance, and fraternal charity.

He saw uniformity as a way of avoiding envy and division. "In honor of the common life," stated the Rules, "which Christ our Lord chose to lead in order to be like others and so to gain them more easily for God the Father, all shall observe . . . uniformity in all things, looking upon it as the safeguard to good order and holy union."²⁰ The very wording seemed to indicate that the practice of this virtue was aimed at the apostolate. In the same way that Jesus became one among many to win people for God, so too must the confreres. Vincent elaborated on this in a conference. "As regards the end of our vocation," he explained, "which is to strive after our own perfection, to labor for the instruction of the people, and the improvement of ecclesiastics, we ought to agree in judgment; we ought all to form our judgment in the same manner and become alike in practice."²¹

The example of nature supported his contention. After all, the many individuals of each species acted identically. "Take, for instance, the pigeons of a dovecote," said Vincent.

They are like each other; they all have the same little ways of going about things; they all have the same instincts, and what one does the other does Because moral actions surpass instinct and are formed by reason, they ought to tend more perfectly toward uniformity which, being willed and ordained by God, ought to make us do by reason what the animals do by instinct. What nature must bestow on animals, grace may work in us. . . . Uniformity begets union in the Company; it is the cement which binds together, it is the beauty which renders us amiable, and makes us strive to have the same manner of understanding things, to have the same desires and to pursue the same objects.²²

In other words, the more the confreres were alike, the more they approached their vocation in a similar way, the less likely they were to be envious, divisive, or disorderly. Union and harmony would prevail, and the mission would proceed undisturbed.

Uniformity had a dark side, too. Vincent so stressed this virtue at the end of his life that he was willing to emasculate talent. "If hitherto we have endeavored to excel," he told his men, "in the name of God, my

²⁰*Common Rules*, 2:11.

²¹Conference on uniformity, 23 May 1659, *CED*, 12:246-47.

²²*Ibid.*, 12:249 and 251.

brothers, let this happen no more! If I can rise to a great height by the power of genius and the strength of eloquence, I will rise only to half the height. . . . If I have two thoughts, one fine and subtle, the other lowly and less striking, I will take the latter and renounce the former. Let us adapt ourselves to the ordinary."²³ In speaking of homilies, he declared, "I go further still. Not only should we preach in a familiar style, but we should be ordinary preachers, that we may all be uniform. For each one can approach the ordinary, but few can attain sublimity."²⁴

This sacrifice of talent seems extreme. Here, Vincent, like other saints, is more to be admired than imitated. Rather than urge confreres to be average, it would have been better, like Saint Paul, to encourage them to develop the generosity of heart that rejoices in a diversity of gifts given by the same Spirit for the common good.²⁵

Patience was the second means of unity advocated by Vincent. "Forbearance in the Company," he declared, "is what nerves are in a man's body. And, in effect, what is there to be seen but disorder in a house or Company where forbearance does not reign?" He begged the confreres to put up with each other in everything—ill humors, aggravating manners, irritating speech, and other annoying personal habits. Jesus modeled such behavior. He bore with Peter who disowned him and with Paul who persecuted his followers.²⁶ Vincent reminded Father René Alméras of this when the latter wanted to oust a few troublesome members from his house. "Our Lord," the saint told him, "did not expel Saint Peter for having denied him several times, nor even Judas, although he should have died in his sin."²⁷

As an aid in the practice of this virtue, Vincent invited confreres to look to themselves. "We must hold as an irrefutable maxim," he told Nicolas Durot, "that the difficulties we have with our neighbor stem more from our poorly mortified moods than from anything else."²⁸ To a lay brother who complained of having to put up with the faults of those around him, the saint wrote, "You well know that you yourself are not always in the same mood; if today you are very assiduous, close to God, and edify the whole house, tomorrow you will be slovenly, lax,

²³Ibid., 12:255. In both this and the next quotation, I have translated the words *mediocre* and *mediocrité* as "ordinary." This, rather than the pejoratively nuanced term "mediocre," conveys the sense of the French used in Vincent's time.

²⁴Ibid., 12:256.

²⁵See 1 Corinthians: 12.

²⁶Conférence on forbearance, 5 July 1658, *CED*, 12:34-35.

²⁷Vincent de Paul to René Alméras, 15 July 1650, *CED*, 4:37.

²⁸Vincent de Paul to Nicolas Durot, n.d. December 1639, *CED*, 1:608.

and a bother to the others. Then they will have to put up with you, just as you will have to put up with them."²⁹

Personal weakness was not the only thing to hinder forbearance; lack of understanding also played a part. "Most people offend God," commented Vincent, "by criticizing what other people do . . . without knowing the reasons they have for doing what they do; for how can you draw conclusions about something without knowing the principles involved?"³⁰ Apropos of this was his reply to Father Mark Cogley, superior at Sedan, who inquired how to deal with the quick-tempered, the touchy, and the critical. "My answer," wrote Vincent, "is that prudence should determine this, and that in some cases it is useful to see the thing from their point of view, making yourself all things to all men." The saint added that in other cases one might have to take a firm stand.³¹

Fraternal charity was even more important than forbearance for the preservation of good order and the common life. The *Common Rules* demanded that missionaries practice this virtue constantly.³² Once again, Vincent gave this an apostolic twist. In a conference on the subject, he said that God had brought the Congregation into existence to show his "boundless and fatherly love which desires to be established in, and to replenish souls. . . . Our vocation," continued the saint,

is to go . . . through all the land . . . to inflame the hearts of men, to do what God's son did, who came to cast fire upon earth so as to inflame it with his love. . . . If we are at all to bring God's love far and near, if at all to inflame the nations with it, if at all to have the vocation of spreading this divine fire to the whole world, if that is so, I say, if that is so, my brothers, how should I myself not burn with this divine fire! How should I not enkindle myself to love those with whom I live, how should I not edify my own brothers by the exercise of love and lead my dear confreres to practice the works which emanate from it.³³

For Vincent, fraternal charity had as its end those *outside* the Congregation. It was apostolic. Missionaries were to spread the love of God abroad. Yet the saint was faithful to the maxim that charity begins at home. If confreres were to inflame the world with love, they must ignite it in each other by practicing it in the house. Thus, community was to enliven the mission.

²⁹Vincent de Paul to a lay brother at the house in Genoa, 16 August 1652, *CED*, 4:452.

³⁰Vincent de Paul to Louis Lebreton, 28 February 1640, *CED*, 2:29-30.

³¹Vincent de Paul to Mark Cogley, 4 October 1650, *CED*, 4:90.

³²*Common Rules*, 2:12.

³³Conference on charity, 30 May 1659, *CED*, 12:262-63.

Because common life supported the apostolate, one might expect the Congregation to be organized like a business or the military. So it was. The superior was powerful and became more so (or at least the description of his function did) as time progressed. In 1628 the saint informed the pope that the Priests of the Mission lived “under the direction and correction of this Vincent de Paul.”³⁴ Ten years later he described the superior’s role in community life as follows: “We never go out without [the superior’s] permission and always two by two. Upon return, everyone goes to see the superior and gives him an account of what he has done. We neither write nor receive letters unless the superior has seen and approved them. Everyone is obliged to agree to have his faults charitably reported to the superior.”³⁵

The *Common Rules* further refined the latter’s responsibility, making it practically absolute. Confreres were required to obey him “with a certain blind obedience, submitting their judgment and will, not only to his will manifested to them, but even to his intention, judging that always to be better which he commands, and committing themselves to his disposition, as the file in the hands of an artisan.”³⁶

At specified times during the week, missionaries were to assemble to hear instructions given by the superior about the good order of the house. His control over temporal goods (food, clothing, furnishings, etc.) was complete. He dispensed them to each according to need. Confreres needed his permission to lend and borrow or to remove anything from the house. His authority reached even into the spiritual life; four times a year, every missionary was to make a routine manifestation of conscience to him. If in between times a special difficulty arose, its remedy was to be sought from the superior.³⁷

This power was not to be exercised tyrannically but meekly and gently.³⁸ Vincent often used the endearing word “family” in reference to local communities. In his vision, the superior was to be one among equals. To Father Cogley, who held that office in Sedan, he declared, “Those who manage the houses of the Company ought to regard no one as an inferior, but indeed as a brother. . . . They must be treated with

³⁴Vincent de Paul et al. to Urban VIII, n.d. June 1628, *CED*, 1:46.

³⁵Vincent de Paul to Jane Frances de Chantal, 14 July 1639, *CED*, 1:565.

³⁶*Common Rules*, 5:2-3.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 2:16; 3:3, 5, 9; 5:5; and 10:11.

³⁸See, for example, Vincent de Paul to Portail, 16 October 1635, *CED*, 1:311; same to same, 15 August 1636, *ibid.*, 341; same to Robert de Sergis, 3 February 1639, *ibid.*, 535.

³⁹Vincent de Paul to Mark Cogley, 15 August 1650, *CED*, 4:51.

humility, sweetness, forbearance, cordiality, and love.”³⁹ Encouraging Robert de Sergis in this regard, Vincent recounted an incident that touched him deeply. “I made a journey,” he wrote, “with three Discalced Carmelites without being able to tell which one was the superior, until I asked about it after being with them for three days, because the superior so truly lived with the others in goodness, gentleness, condescension, and humility.”⁴⁰ This experience impressed him to such a degree that years later he echoed it in advice given to Antoine Durand, the superior at Agde. “Live with your confreres cordially and simply,” directed the saint, “in such a way that seeing you together, it would be impossible to guess who the superior is.”⁴¹

The purpose of the gently enforced regimentation of community life was the apostolate. If confreres were to be like files in the hands of an artisan (the superior), the Congregation was to be the same in the hands of the bishop. Although Vincent desired (and got) the exemption of the community from episcopal rule over internal affairs, the confreres were to “be obliged, in what concerns the missions, to obey the most reverend bishops and ordinaries of their residence, and to go wherever and to whomever they send them without any excuse or pretext, except in the case of illness or excessive fatigue.”⁴² This became one of the five fundamental rules of the mission.⁴³ Eventually, the saint saw it as another fulfillment of evangelical maxims. “With regard to our lords, the bishops,” he told Jane Frances de Chantal, “we live in the spirit of the servants of the gospel. When they say, ‘go there,’ we go; ‘come here,’ we come; ‘do that,’ we do it; and that is how we act in the functions [of the apostolate].”⁴⁴ Such obedience, like charity, began at home. If missionaries were good soldiers in the house, they would be, under the bishops’ guidance, good ones on the missions too.

The foregoing clearly indicates the apostolic nature of the Vincentian Congregation. Called into existence for the sake of the mission, community life aimed at supporting this in a variety of ways. It served as the seedbed and stimulus for virtues to be practiced for the salvation of souls; it offered, through evangelical poverty, the freedom to go unencumbered from village to village and bring good news to the poor; it

³⁹Vincent de Paul to Robert de Sergis, 3 February 1639, *CED*, 1:535.

⁴⁰Vincent de Paul to Antoine Durand, undated [1656], *CED*, 6:66.

⁴¹Vincent de Paul et al. to Urban VIII, n.d. June 1628, *CED*, 1:49.

⁴²Vincent de Paul to François du Coudray, 1631, *CED*, 1:115.

⁴³Vincent de Paul to Jane Frances de Chantal, 14 July 1639, *CED*, 1:563. See also same to Clement de Bonzi, bishop of Béziers, September or October 1635, *ibid.*, 309.

stood before the people as a model of Christian living; perhaps most important, it provided the organization to carry all this out. Vincent borrowed much from the religious life of the time but gave it an apostolic focus. Although the particulars of his brand of community may be outdated, the broad outlines are perennial. The task of contemporary disciples is to refashion common life in a way meaningful to present conditions.

The major difference between the past and present is the diversity of apostolates. During Vincent's time, missions were the key activity — even confreres in parishes and seminaries gave them. In fact, parishes were to be accepted only if they doubled as mission houses. Thus, community life revolved around and supported a specific work entailing a specific lifestyle. The modern Vincentian has no such luxury. Apostolates vary within each province and sometimes within each house, thus making it difficult to formulate a single plan of community life to suit all occasions. For this reason the house plan offers the simplest solution to the riddle of common life in contemporary times. In order to be true to Vincent's impulse, the local apostolate must stand at the center. Confreres need to determine with clarity what they hope to achieve and the virtues and way of life necessary to do it. They will then devise a spiritual and temporal regimen to instill and foster the attainment of their end. Crucial in all of this must be the notion of mutual support, a cardinal element of the founder's vision and scheme.

It is God's will that we should leave the discernment of truth and falsehood to him.

*(Saint Vincent de Paul, conference to Daughters of Charity,
22 January 1648).*