



# **The Beginning of the Congregation of the Mission: Historical Sketch and Attempt of Actualization**

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## ***Abstract***

This article explores the origins of the Congregation of the Mission not as a static historical fact but as a dynamic, Spirit-led journey rooted in faith and discernment. Emphasizing that the foundation was God's initiative—not a human project—St. Vincent de Paul saw the Mission as a response to grace, shaped over time through personal and pastoral experiences. The long preparation included Vincent's encounters with Cardinal Bérulle, Madame de Gondi, and St. Francis de Sales, which progressively deepened his priestly identity and missionary calling. Key events like the missions in Folleville and Châtillon, and his ministry to the poor, marked a shift from clerical ambition to evangelical charity. The formal establishment came in 1625 through the generous support of Madame de Gondi, culminating in a foundation contract that defined the mission: to evangelize the rural poor freely and itinerantly. This founding spirit remains a living source of inspiration for Vincentian identity and mission today.

Cet article explore les origines de la Congrégation de la Mission non pas comme un fait historique statique, mais comme un parcours dynamique, guidé par l'Esprit, enraciné dans la foi et le discernement. Soulignant que la fondation était une initiative de Dieu – et non un projet humain –, saint Vincent de Paul considérait la Mission comme une réponse à la grâce, façonnée au fil du temps par des expériences personnelles et pastorales. La longue préparation a notamment été marquée par les rencontres de Vincent avec le cardinal Bérulle, Madame de Gondi et saint François de Sales, qui ont progressivement approfondi son identité sacerdotale et sa vocation missionnaire. Des événements clés, tels que les missions à Folleville et à Châtillon, ainsi que son ministère auprès des pauvres, ont marqué le passage d'une ambition cléricale à une charité évangélique. La fondation officielle a eu lieu en 1625 grâce au généreux soutien de Madame de Gondi, aboutissant à un contrat de fondation qui définissait la mission : évangéliser gratuitement et de manière itinérante les pauvres des campagnes. Cet esprit fondateur reste aujourd'hui une source d'inspiration vivante pour l'identité et la mission vincentiennes.

Este artículo explora los orígenes de la Congregación de la Misión no como un hecho histórico estático, sino como un camino dinámico, guiado por el Espíritu, arraigado en la fe y el discernimiento. Haciendo hincapié en que la fundación fue una iniciativa de Dios —y no un proyecto humano—, San Vicente de Paúl vio la Misión como una respuesta a la gracia, moldeada a lo largo del tiempo a través de experiencias personales y pastorales. La larga preparación incluyó los encuentros de Vicente con el cardenal Bérulle, Madame de Gondi y San Francisco de Sales, que profundizaron progresivamente su identidad sacerdotal y su vocación misionera. Acontecimientos clave como las misiones en Folleville y Châtillon, y su ministerio con los pobres,



marcaron un cambio de la ambición clerical a la caridad evangélica. La fundación formal se produjo en 1625 gracias al generoso apoyo de Madame de Gondi, y culminó con un contrato fundacional que definía la misión: evangelizar a los pobres del campo de forma gratuita e itinerante. Este espíritu fundacional sigue siendo una fuente viva de inspiración para la identidad y la misión vicencianas en la actualidad.

**Keywords:** the Congregation of the Mission, Identity, Mission Contract, Vincent de Paul.

An anniversary refers to a specific point in time at which an event occurred. When we celebrate it, we risk viewing it as a museum piece. But with regard to vital events, it is necessary to rethink them in the light of a development that has its own beginning and movement, which like a DNA continues to generate new shoots and new vitality. Reflecting on the beginnings of the Congregation, therefore, implies situating oneself within the dynamism that the Spirit has injected and continues to inject into the fragment of the Church that is our Congregation.

It is a matter of getting in tune with the motion of the Spirit acting on our spiritual sensibility, for - as St. Vincent said - "the Holy Spirit is in perpetual effusion upon souls. And whoever could see with the eyes of the body such effusion, would be enchanted!"<sup>1</sup> . Unfortunately, this activity has become arduous in our time, because we are imbued with the "rationalist spirit," but to establish a connection between our understanding of the beginnings and that of St. Vincent requires a "fusion of horizons" that occurs only in faith.

## 1. AWARENESS THAT GOD IS AT THE ORIGIN OF THE SOCIETY.

With clear vision of faith, St. Vincent, when he thinks back to the origins of the Congregation, refers to an intervention guided by grace and not a human project. And he insists by saying that when the original grace of vocation is at work in its members, the spiritual quality of their activities is multiplied, to the point that "a Company, can do everything, if it is animated and led by the spirit of God."<sup>2</sup> This is the clear source point to which St. Vincent refers when thinking about the beginnings of the Company.<sup>3</sup>

I ask you: who founded the Society? Who destined us for missions, ordinands, conferences, retreats, etc.? Was it me? Not at all. Was it Father Portail, whom God united with me from the beginning? Not really! We didn't think about it and we didn't make any plans. Who then is the author of it? *It is God, it is His fatherly Providence and pure Goodness.* We are all but miserable laborers and poor ignorant people, and among us there are but few or no noble, powerful, educated, or capable of anything.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. THE LONG PERIOD OF PREPARATION FOR THE BIRTH OF THE MISSION.

This perception in St. Vincent occurred through the slow flow of his history. Time works in the soul. The attunement and assimilation of an insight wants the duration of time. *A revelation makes its way by walking:* at a walking pace, not a running pace. Things of the spirit to take flesh do not come to the world in a few days. It is not enough to

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<sup>1</sup> *SVit X*, 15 (Coste XI, 18).

<sup>2</sup> *SVit X*, 177 (Coste XI, 203).

<sup>3</sup> "Neither to our rules, nor to the Company, nor to the very name of Mission I had never thought of it. God did it all; men had no part in it. As for me, when I consider what circumstances God wanted to use to bring the Company into being in His Church, I confess to you that I cannot tell where I am, and everything I see seems like a dream. This is not human; it is the work of God. Would you call human what the mind did not foresee and what the will did not desire or seek in any way? Good Father Portail had not thought of it; much less had I thought of it; everything was done against all my hopes and without my thinking about it in any way. When I think of this and then see what the Company does, in truth it seems to me like a dream and me in the midst of the dream": *SVit X*, 359 (Coste XII, 7).

<sup>4</sup> *SVit X*, 31 (Coste XI, 38).

conceive them; they have their own gestation. If you want to understand a story you have to inhabit it in its events

Thus, the beginning of the Mission Company, hidden in God's plan, is intertwined with the human events of Vincent's own personal history. The experiences, into which his story led him, brought a particular coloring to the figure of the missionary-charitable vocation that he would transfuse into the future Company. In other words, the personal events of St. Vincent constitute the womb within which the process of his formation took place. Consequently, it is necessary to briefly retrace its stages.

### **1. The encounter with Bérulle and the devotional environment**

After his adventures as a young priest that led him to experience human failures, Vincent still dazed by his past comes into contact with the Parisian climate characterized by a desire for reform in Catholicism. This is around 1609. He approaches Card. de Bérulle, of whom he says he was "one of the holiest men I have known."<sup>5</sup>

At its contact he breathes the thought of the immense greatness of God, unattainable without the Incarnation of the Word. He simultaneously absorbs the consciousness of man's finitude, since - according to Bérulle's formula - "man is a nothing that can do nothing without God," and perceives the need to "adhere to the states of life" of Christ in order to fill "the void" of which every man is constituted. And in particular he assimilates the doctrine of the priesthood as an extension of the mission of the Word, which transmits God's holiness to men.<sup>6</sup>

Living for a time in Bérulle's house, he allowed himself to be guided by him. Although Bérulle's stern and rather aristocratic character never fully convinced Vincent, who had the sunny disposition of southern men and peasants, *contact with him was the detonator that challenged the life he had lived until then*. That is why, in the circle of "devotees" revolving around Madame Acarie, he felt closest to him the "good Father Duval": a Sorbonne doctor of vigorous thought, but quiet and modest.

In any case, the spiritual climate breathed in that environment led Vincent to rethink the meaning of his own priesthood, of which he had his first pastoral experience in Clichy.<sup>7</sup> It was a happy experience, but the sublime height of the priesthood, inculcated by Bérulle, settled in Vincent's soul with the perception of an inadequacy between his having become a priest and what the priest should have been, as around the age of 76 he would say speaking of his "youthful temerity."<sup>8</sup>

If Vincenzo so many years later blames himself for this audacity, one can hazard a guess that it left in his consciousness a feeling of unease, akin to a sense of guilt, which he tried to redeem by trying to reformulate his way of life as a priest. In any case, in this intimate and secret subsoil of Vincenzo's soul there was an urgent need for change. Signs of this are the various episodes narrated by the biography: the renunciation of defending

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<sup>5</sup> *SVit* X, 123 (Coste XI, 139).

<sup>6</sup> J. CALVET, *La littérature religieuse de François de Sales à Fénelon*, Ed. Gigord, Paris 1938, 89-99.

<sup>7</sup> Things went like this: since François Bourgoing intended to devote himself completely to the fledgling Oratory, Bérulle proposed that Vincent replace him as parish priest of Clichy (Oct. 13, 1611). *SVit* XI, 19 (Coste XIII, 17).

<sup>8</sup> "I confess to you," he writes to the Canon de Saint-Martin, "that I never wished my nephew to become a clergyman, and still less did I entertain the idea of having him educated for this purpose, even though this condition is the most sublime that exists on earth, and the one that Our Lord wished to assume and exercise. As for me, *if I had known what it was all about when I had the audacity to enter it, as I learned later, I would have preferred to cultivate the earth rather than engage in such a fearful state*. And this is what I have declared more than a hundred times to the poor peasants, when, in order to encourage them to live contentedly and as good people, I told them that I thought them blessed in their condition; and indeed, *the older I become, the more I confirm myself in this sentiment, for I discover every day how far I am from the perfection in which I ought to be*." - *SVit* V, 442-443 (Coste V, 568).

himself against the accusation of larceny (1609); the delivery to the *Fate bene fratelli* hospital in Paris of a large sum of money received on the eve of his becoming parish priest of Clichy (1611); the disappointment suffered around the events of the priory of Saint-Léonard-de-Chaumes (1610-1616), in the same period of which occurs the crisis of faith of the Sorbonne doctor whose punishments Vincenzo wanted to take on.<sup>9</sup> These events shed some light on the slow change taking place in Vincent's priestly consciousness.

## 2. The events of Gannes, Folleville and Madame de Gondi

The awareness that his priesthood had to be transformed from the pursuit of a good social arrangement to an evangelizing priesthood grew in Vincent during the early period of his service with the de Gondi (1613-1617), where he was directed by Bérulle. Some facts let this transpire. He feels nostalgia for leaving his parishioners in Clichy and the pastoral attention given to the de Gondi's country villages.<sup>10</sup> Dating from this period are sermons on the importance of teaching Catechism and Communion,<sup>11</sup> and the request to the vicar general of Sens, Edme Mauljean, to absolve the grave sins reserved for the bishop<sup>12</sup> that reveal the particular religious vivacity quivering in his soul. At the same time, he tries to appease Madame de Gondi's scrupulousness and attachment by distancing himself from her by pairing him with a Franciscan for confession.<sup>13</sup> These facts hint that a new horizon was emerging in Vincent's soul, that of caring for the abandoned people of the countryside. This desire soon generated in Vincent the upheaval of finding himself confined in a noble house: biographers hint at a resumption of the crisis of faith and tell that his soul was reconciled only when he made the resolution to devote his life to the poor.<sup>14</sup>

It is noteworthy-as Pierre Coste observes-that it is events that guide Vincent's movements and activity. These "obey suggestions that come to him from outside! ... It certainly cannot be said that, because of this, there was an absence of initiative in him, but these external interventions were necessary for him. Vincent waited for them, not out of timidity, but out of principle. He preferred to be chosen rather than to come forward and propose."<sup>15</sup>

It was within this evolution of Vincent's human soul that the Spirit ignited the spark from which the Congregation of the Mission came to life. And this spark was

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<sup>9</sup> M.J. GUILLAUME, *Vincent de Paul, a saint in the great century*, CLV-ed. Vincentians, Rome 2023, pp. 80-81.

<sup>10</sup> He speaks enthusiastically about it again in 1653 to the Daughters of Charity: *SVit* IX, 476 (Coste IX, 643).

<sup>11</sup> .The sermon on catechism was delivered in Joigny, March-April 1616, when Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondi took possession of this county upon the death of his uncle, Card. Pierre de Gondi. Doc, 15. 16: *SVit* XI, 32-37 (Coste XIII, 31-37).

<sup>12</sup> *SVit* I, 17 (Coste I, 20-21)

<sup>13</sup> P. COSTE, *Un grand saint ... o.c.* I, 81.

<sup>14</sup> P. COLLET, *La vie de saint Vincent de Paul*, Nancy 1748, I, p. 34: cf M.J. GUILLAUME, *Vincent de Paul, o.c.* 81.

<sup>15</sup> P. COSTE, *Un grand saint ... o. c.* III, 321. 374.

ignited through the mediation of Madame de Gondi,<sup>16</sup> whom Vincent would not hesitate to call "our foundress."<sup>17</sup> Let us remember.

Facing the dying man in the village of Gannes in January 1617, Vincent, after confessing the peasant, remains silent. But the latter turning to Madame de Gondi exclaims, "Madame, I was damned!" And immediately she reacts instinctively out of her own spiritual sensitivity, "Ah, Father Vincent, how many souls are lost! What can be done to remedy it?"<sup>18</sup> This moved cry kindled in Vincent's consciousness even more the desire to come to the rescue of those souls. And, eight days later, again Madame de Gondi asked Vincent to preach on general confession in the church of Folleville.<sup>19</sup>

The unexpected success of Folleville's preaching sparked an idea in Madame de Gondi to create a fund of 16,000 liras for a community that agreed to preach a mission on all her lands five years at a time. She approached the Jesuit provincial, who declined the offer.<sup>20</sup> The same fate befell the request made to Bourdoise and Bérulle. In the face of these refusals, madame de Gondi made this foundation the subject of a testamentary clause in favor of St. Vincent, to whom she left the choice of places and the manner of carrying out the mission.<sup>21</sup> In the following months, madame de Gondi began to cede more and more space Vincent for missionary pilgrimages to her lands.

### 3. Châtillon and the first missions in the campaign

The missionary enthusiasm aroused by the Folleville event could have cooled with the request, made again by Bérulle to Vincent, to leave the de Gondi household to once again replace François Bourgoing in the village of Châtillon.<sup>22</sup> That was in August 1617. Vincent agreed. But Bérulle did not reckon with either the designs of Providence or the obstinacy of Madame de Gondi.

The pause in Châtillon was also providential for Vincent. It opened his eyes to the bodily miseries of the poor and he realized that he could not succor them alone, but by involving others on their behalf.<sup>23</sup> Thus Vincent's vocation was going to be enriched, after the proclamation of the Gospel, also by the service of charity as a characteristic of his identity. It was only a spark that would later light a fire, as the void Vincent had left in the de Gondi household sparked madame de Gondi's nagging quest to have him return. Bérulle could not oppose the de Gondi family, since the bishop of Paris had been involved

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<sup>16</sup> "How wonderful, brothers! No one had ever thought about it and no one even knew what missions were. Neither did I think of them, and I did not know what they consisted in. And it is by this that we recognize the work of God: when in a work men had no part in it, we are faced with a work of God, and it comes directly from Him. Then He uses men to carry it out. Well then, two things prompted Generaless 1 to have that poor people make general confession ... the late lady, confessing one day to her pastor, observed that he did not give her absolution, but only mumbled a few things between her teeth, and so every other time she confessed to him. This somewhat distressed her, so that she asked a religious, who had gone to visit her, for the favor of writing down the formula of absolution for her, and she obtained it. The good lady, going back to confession, begged the parish priest to pronounce upon her the words of absolution contained in that paper, and he did so. And she continued to do so every time she returned to him for confession, giving him the paper, because she did not know the words she had to utter, so ignorant was she. Having told me this, I too placed more attention on the words of those from whom I was confessing, and I realized that it was indeed true: some priests did not know the words of absolution. Now, that good lady, who was still unmarried when this happened to her, also remembered it afterwards, and considering the danger in which all those poor souls were, in order to remedy such misfortune, she made the determination to have them give a course of sermons on how to make a good general confession and on the necessity of making at least one in one's lifetime" (*SVit* X, 154-155 (Coste XI, 169-170).

<sup>17</sup> *SVit* X, 110 (Coste XI, 121-122); 379 (Coste XII, 34-35).

<sup>18</sup> *SVit* X, 359-369 (Coste, XII, 8-9).

<sup>19</sup> *SVit* X, 3 (Coste XI, 4).

<sup>20</sup> *SVit* X, 155 (Coste XI, 171).

<sup>21</sup> P. COSTE, *Un grand saint ... o. c. I*, 90; cf. Doc 23a, *SVit* XI, 52 note (Coste XIII, 56-57).

<sup>22</sup> M.J. GUILLAUME, *Vincent de Paul, a saint ... o.c.* p.110.

<sup>23</sup> The events probably brought back to his memory the experience of helping the poor that he had experienced during his Roman period in the parish of San Lorenzo in Damaso: A. ARMANDI, *Une étrange coïncidence: Saint Vincent de Paul à Rome et les conférences dites de Saint Vincent de Paul*, Charité et Mission 1963, pp. 224-226.

in the affair. In fact, on Christmas Eve 1617 Vincent found this family again. He had now won his freedom, however, because the education of the de Gondi children was entrusted to Antoine Portail,<sup>24</sup> and he could devote himself more continuously to missionary preaching. While waiting for his will to be fulfilled, Madame de Gondi also became enthusiastically involved in Vincent's missionary projects.

"As soon as he returned to Paris in 1618," writes Pierre Coste, "Vincent drew up a plan to evangelize the de Gondi lands. Folleville had already been evangelized the previous year. In early 1618 he began with Villepreux, then Joigny, Montmirail and surrounding villages, accompanied by Jean Cocqueret, doctor of theology, Berger et Gontière, clergymen advisors to the Parliament of Paris and other clergymen. Madame de Gondi also played her part: with abundant alms and by visiting the sick and poor she contributed to the success of those first missions."<sup>25</sup>

The "mission" was going beyond the initial cue of general confession; it now aimed to take the gospel to the countryside. And therefore the missionaries' stay lasted several weeks up to two months. Those early days of missions were remembered by Vincent with emotion.<sup>26</sup> It was with this inflamed state of mind that Vincent, a few months after his return to the Gondi house. in the fall of 1618, had his encounter with St. Francis de Sales. An encounter that shaped Vincent's soul, making him fit, through simplicity and gentleness, to empathize with the intimate sorrow of the poor and announce to them the glad news of the Gospel.

#### 4. The encounter with Francis de Sales

It was not a chance meeting. Instead, it was an unexpected and dazzling revelation that was indelibly imprinted on Vincent's soul. In the context of the Congregation's origins, this encounter had the function of accentuating certain traits of "devout humanism," which would become essential to the Vincentian "spirit," such as simplicity in preaching, amiability in relationships, holy indifference, a spirit of condescension, zeal and apostolic fervor.<sup>27</sup> These traits were not introduced by doctrinal means, but through the osmotic method of a spiritual-aesthetic and sympathetic experience that imprinted itself in Vincent's sensitive soul more deeply than any theoretical doctrine.<sup>28</sup>

Mirroring himself in St. Francis, Vincent discovered by contrast what he lacked: he bilious temperament lacked the amiability and gentleness that instead emanated from the person of Francis and affected him by the change of character.<sup>29</sup> This took place-as

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<sup>24</sup> M.J. GUILLAUME, *Vincent de Paul, a saint ... o.c.* 119.

<sup>25</sup> P. COSTE, *Un grand saint ... o.c.* I, 117. "The foundation of the Mission began like this: we were two associate priests, and we took a third salaried one to come with us to work for the salvation of the poor country people, and another man to guard the house" (L 2698, Coste VII, 320).

<sup>26</sup> "I remember (do I have to say it?) that, years ago, when returning from a mission I would return to Paris, it seemed to me that the gates of the city should fall on me and crush me. [...] The reason was that inside I thought, 'You return to Paris, and other villages are waiting for you to do the same thing you did in this and that!' [...] ...they wait for the mission, and you go back, you abandon them!": *SVit X*, 350-351 (Coste XI, 444-445).

<sup>27</sup> E. ANTONELLO, *Saint Francis de Sales and Saint Vincent: a fruitful friendship*, in *Charity and Mission*, New Series, 1(2020)7-34; *Saint Francis de Sales: the figure and spirituality four hundred years after his death (1622-2022)*, in *Charity and Mission*, New Series, 2(2021) 28-56; *Francis de Sales, an authentic believer. At the sources of the Vincentian vocation*. *Charity and Mission Supplement* 2022/2, 100 pp.

<sup>28</sup> E. ANTONELLO, *With the Eyes of Monsieur Vincent. The aesthetic key in the interpretation of St. Vincent*, Works, *Correspondence VI* (Italian translation), CLV Edizioni Vincenziane, Rome 2022, *Introduction*, XIX-LXIII.

<sup>29</sup> Pierre Coste observes, "Because of his temperament prone to black humor Vincent was easily irascible and sometimes overstepped into anger. He had to struggle a great deal to overcome this temper of his and-as Abelly reports-he says of himself, 'I turned to God and begged Him insistently to change this dry and repulsive temper of mine by giving me a gentle and benevolent spirit; and by the grace of Our Lord, the care to restrain the boils of nature has delivered me little by little from my black humor.'" P. COSTE, *Grand saint ... o.c.* III, 351.

Collet notes-in the spiritual exercises lived in Soissons in 1621,<sup>30</sup> and as Vincent himself confirms in a letter to Father Codoing.<sup>31</sup>

He had been frequenting the capital's spiritual revival circles for almost two decades,<sup>32</sup> but "having reached the threshold of his thirty-seventh year," wrote A. Dodin - Vincenzo had the grace of seeing, loving and contemplating a living model, who represented to him live the figure of Jesus."<sup>33</sup> The encounter was for Vincent a jolt that fecundated with amiability his purpose of wanting to put himself at the service of the poor, which was the orientation that was now fixed in his soul as a vocation. The experiences he had had in 1617-1618 certainly had been decisive for Vincent, but insufficient to shape his charismatic vocation. What was needed was a catalyst that would amalgamate them and make them vibrate. This glue Vincent found in his encounter with St. Francis, thanks to which a change took over in him that led him to look at the poor in the new perspective of amiability.<sup>34</sup> It was this *imprinting* that St. Francis imparted to the charitable generosity of St. Vincent who was in the early stages of discovering his calling; and it thus contributed to characterize the *esprit* of his vocation - to put it in a word of the time that is dense with meaning - or of his charism - as we are used to say today.

### 3. THE GESTATION AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE MISSION

In the years immediately following these events, Vincent's experience was enriched by other experiences: appointment as Chaplain General of the Royal galleys (1619)<sup>35</sup> with the spiritual care of convicts and the preaching of the mission in Bordeaux (1623); and the great success of the Mâcon charity organization (1621). With this wealth of accumulated experience Vincent arrived at the decisive scene for the Mission Congregation.

#### (a) Uncertainty about a stable mission project

From 1617 to 1624, the period of the congregation's long gestation, St. Vincent *was on tenterhooks for the realization of a stable project*. Holding him in suspense were two reasons. The first, the role of chaplain to the galleys that committed him outside Paris and, probably, the shadow of Bérulle who, as it turned out, was disappointed with the new

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<sup>30</sup> L. COLLET, *La vie de saint Vincent de Paul*, Nancy 1748, I, p. 99.

<sup>31</sup> *SVit* II, 208.

<sup>32</sup> The horizons of this environment were polarized along two divergent directions or sensibilities. The first, according to the formula created by Brémond, was that of a "Christian humanism" that valued man's freedom and his fundamental positivity. This spirituality trusting in divine mercy, which connected reason with faith on the basis of man created in the image of God, was spread through Jesuit colleges and the thought of St. Francis de Sales (*Introduction to the Devout Life of 1608*: a text highly valued in devout circles and reprinted no less than 40 times while St. Francis was alive). The second sensibility was the Augustinian one, which accentuated the pessimistic view on man and turned into a rigorist key until it led to Jansenism. In the first two decades of the century this Augustinianism still preserved the balance between the assiduous search for God's love - based on the axiom: "the heart of man is made for God and remains restless until it rests in Him" - and the vision of a human nature that, corrupted by original sin and without grace, is incapable of turning to good. It was around 1618 that this balance began to break down: this is the period when Bérulle attempted to impose on the Carmelite nuns he was directing "the vow of slavery to Jesus and the Virgin Mary," arousing the strong protest of his cousin, Mother Marie de l'Incarnation (formerly Madame Acarie). And it is to this period (1618) that Vincent's detachment from Bérulle and rapprochement with Francis de Sales dates.

<sup>33</sup> A. Dodin, *François de Sales, Vincent de Paul. Les deux amis*, OEIL, Paris 1984, p.12.

<sup>34</sup> I insist on this theme, which seems to me central to understanding the evolution of Vincent's soul. In him the commitment to succor did not diminish, but the transformation of the way of living this succor, which until then was linked to his purpose and commitment, but not sufficiently accorded with the grace of the Spirit, took place. Francis de Sales' mediation was the instrument God used to leaven service to the poor with the Spirit's affection, transforming it into the charism of God's agape among poor people. His encounter with St. Francis made him realize that "the manner" in which one expresses the exposition of the Gospel and the service of charity determines its content. If the word of the Gospel that is proclaimed is full of mercy and gentleness, it is no different, from the point of view of teaching, from the same word spoken with arrogant and moralistic presumption; but in the first case it is a word that consoles, in the second case it is a word that depresses because it judges and condemns. In the first case, the person feels revived; in the second, he feels dead

<sup>35</sup> *SVit* XI, 51 (Coste XIII, 55).

Company, while he would have expected the former disciple to join the Oratory. The second, the positive outcomes of his missionary experience, based on creativity and mobility much like the preaching of Jesus in Palestine, which could have crystallized the missionary proclamation in fixed and unchanging forms. On the seesaw of these conflicting feelings Vincent could not make up his mind as he recalled, on April 1, 1642, writing to Father Codoing:

At the beginning of the Mission's foundation, I felt a continuous tension of the spirit, which made me doubt whether the project came from nature or from the evil spirit. For this reason I made a retreat in Soissons, so that it would please God to free my spirit from the complacency and solicitude I felt about that initiative. It pleased God to hear me, so that, by His mercy, He freed me from the one and the other, causing me to enter into the opposite disposition. I think that if the Lord gives any blessing to the Mission and grants that I am not of scandal, the reason lies, after God, in this experience. I therefore continue to remain faithful to the practice of concluding and undertaking nothing, as long as I am in the grip of the ardor of enthusiasm that dilates the expectation of great good.<sup>36</sup>

Meanwhile, Madame de Gondi every year renewed her will by which she intended to provide a sum of money to establish a small group of priests who would go around St. Vincent to preach missions in her lands. But in 1624 he did not want to postpone this project of his any longer. And first he thought of providing those first missionaries with a permanent home. So he persuaded Cardinal Jean-François de Gondi to grant Vincent the College of the Bons-Enfants, which was under the jurisdiction of the archbishop of Paris. The deal was concluded in early March 1624.<sup>37</sup> For the nascent Mission, the Bons-Enfants boarding school was a fortune and was a step toward the stable group of missionaries that Madame de Gondi was pushing for, but it was not yet decisive. For Vincent, the last word was up to events.

It needs to be reiterated: this was Vincent's method in making decisions and it is worth reflecting on it as A. Dodin: "The manner and pace of development of the foundations to which St. Vincent gives life surprises us to the point of confusion. Vincent has no overall plan: his perspectives are short-range, he has no gift of some miraculous illumination about the future. *He passionately and ingeniously perseveres only from the realities that confront him. Ceaselessly he renews his efforts, tests his methods.* And after repeatedly modifying his choices and directives, he sketches out a decision drawn from experience. ... None of his foundations has been the realization of a preliminarily planned program. His creations are within a life that progresses: they live from the impulse of the heart that fertilizes them and have the face of those who make them live."<sup>38</sup>

### **(b) The Mission's founding contract**

The decisive event was when the de Gondi family decided to put a large sum at the disposal of the nascent Mission. And this happened on April 17, 1625, at the de Gondi's Parisian home in the rue Pavée building in the parish of Saint-Sauveur, the foundation contract was signed in the presence of two notaries from Châtelet.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> *SVit* II, 208 (Coste II, 247).

<sup>37</sup> The boarding school of the Bons-Enfants at that time was practically deserted, for when Vincent received it, only two scholars and seven or eight boarders lived there. In early 1624, the principal tenant of the Bons-Enfants boarding school was a certain Louis de Guyart, a doctor of theology, who had agreed to give up his post in exchange for an annual pension of 200 liras. For many years the college of the Bons-Enfants had not received extraordinary maintenance and was "in a pitiful state": P. COSTE, *Le grand saint...*, o. c., I, 172-175.

<sup>38</sup> A. DODIN, *Un père de l'église moderne, saint Vincent de Paul, apôtre et docteur de la charité*, in *Assemblée du Seigneur*, No. 66, 1966, pp. 68-81.

<sup>39</sup> *SVit* XI, 231-234 (Coste XIII, 198-202).

Madame de Gondi, who during twelve years had been able to forge a spiritual fellowship with her chaplain, with the perspicacity of a sixth sense typical of feminine sensibility sensed what direction the experiences of mission and charity should take and, by handing over her possessions to Vincent with great generosity, dissolved his hesitations. This was the undoubted merit of this woman whom Providence placed at Saint Vincent's side. A woman of whom A. Dodin wrote: "Love, simplicity, tenderness, the restlessness of the poor: these virtues familiar to Madame Spouse of the General were like the atmosphere of Nazareth that Vincent breathed in the de Gondi house, that is, the climate of a pure love in which God is pleased to dwell as in an intimate and secret cloister."<sup>40</sup>

At this point Madame de Gondi's earthly design was accomplished. She had spent herself regardless, despite her frail health, in relief and love for the poor. She had aroused, supported, and shared the first realizations of St. Vincent's mission and charity. Two months after signing the contract, assisted by St. Vincent, she died at the age of 42. It must be said: without the fine human sensitivity of this fragile woman figure, eager for the spiritual good of her peasants and determined to carry out a stable project of evangelization, the Mission probably would not have been born. She and her action were the sign that Vincent was waiting for to begin the start of the Mission as a community.

### **(c) The elements of the foundation contract**

The provisions of the contract express the intentions and common will of Vincenzo and his benefactors. The de Gondi set out the reasons for their generosity; and Vincenzo, in the practical provisions of the contract, intervenes with his own clear, pragmatic style.

1. In the first paragraph Philippe-Emmanuel and Françoise-Marguerite, declare their intention: that God be honored in their lands, since they state that "the poor people of the countryside had been left abandoned," while the spiritual needs of the city dwellers God had already provided. Immediately afterwards they indicate the remedy they had thought of, and that is to establish

[a] pious association of certain *clergymen* of recognized piety, doctrine, and ability, *who were willing to renounce both the comforts of the said cities and all the benefits, offices, and dignities of the Church, in order to apply themselves wholly and simply, with the blessing of the bishops within each of their dioceses, to the salvation of these poor people, going from village to village, at the expense of their common coffers, to preach, instruct, exhort and catechize those poor people and bring all to make a good general confession of all their past lives, without receiving any remuneration, for the purpose of distributing the gifts freely received from the generous hand God.*

2. After mentioning their spiritual motives, the de Gondi endowed the congregation *with a capital of 45,000 liras*. Of this, 37,000 paid in cash and the remaining 8,000 to be paid within a year, with the mortgage on their property for that value. Vincenzo de' Paoli-the recipient-was designated as a priest of the diocese of Acqs, but also-and this is a novelty-as a "licentiate in canon law." Biographers assume that he obtained this title in the fall of 1623, since prior to this document it does not appear in any official deed.

3. The de Gondi left it to Vincent de Paul to choose, within a year, *six clergymen to live together and work under his direction.*

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<sup>40</sup> A. DODIN, *Monsieur Vincent et les femmes du XVIIe siècle*, in *Les Rayons*, Revue des Enfants de Marie No. 5, février 1960.

- The only reservation in the text is that *the superior of the Community was to continue living in the de Gondi house.*

- The sum of 45,000 liras was *to be invested in land funds or constituted annuities* so that the profits and income would enable the priests to provide for their maintenance and needs. The congregation itself would manage both the funds and the annuities.

- Upon Vincent's death, his successors were to be elected superior by majority vote every three years.

- The de Gondi were declared founders of the work with rights and prerogatives granted in perpetuity, except for two: they renounced the appointment of offices and imposed obligations regarding Masses and funerals.

4. Then came the proper obligations, relating to the action of the new congregation, which took up and concretized the statement of reasons.

- It would be called "Company, Congregation, or Brotherhood of Fathers, or Priests of the Mission" with life in common and under the obedience of a superior.

- As for how the congregation would operate, the terms of the contract reflected Vincent's experience over the previous eight years.

- Every five years the Mission Priests had to do mission work on donor lands; the rest of the time they could use it to serve others, especially to spiritually assist the "forced poor."

- They had to work from October to June for missions in the countryside; serve one month in the Company; retire fifteen days to their common house, or other place assigned by the superior, for a spiritual retreat of three or four days; then there was a period when they devoted themselves to preparing another mission. In the summer months, when the peasants worked intensively, the priests of the Company had to assist in the villages the parish priests who requested them, especially on Sundays and feast days.

5. Thus, if the contract of April 17, 1625 did not bring new elements about the method and spirit of the missions and *Charités* carried out 1617, it did, however, have the advantage of providing Vincent with the *economic means to perpetuate them, and above all of establishing a community of priests* who would live in common, bound by a stable commitment.

6. The weak point of the contract was *Vincenzo's obligation to reside with the de Gondi.* The community could hardly have overcome the difficulties and lasted without the presence of its superior. However, even here Providence intervened. Françoise-Marguerite's death removed the obstacle: the general of the galleys, after recognizing that Vincent had to live in the community to fulfill his commitments, released him from his obligation to reside in his house in the fall.<sup>41</sup>

#### **(d) Mission Becomes Community**

By 1625, therefore, the Mission had reached a first stability and security: it had become, at least juridically, a "community," or rather-as St. Vincent would say when he

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<sup>41</sup> The unexpected loss of the bride he loved was seen by Philippe-Emmanuel as a warning from heaven: the violence simmering in his soul, fueled by the profession of arms, was a danger to his salvation. Biographers narrate that the pain of grief was so searing that it took away his fascination with the world. It is plausible to think that for her husband, accustomed to worldly comforts, Françoise-Marguerite's death was a spur to give himself to a devout life and seek the way to greater union with God. This probably took its toll on the complex but ardent soul of the general of the galleys. Thus, on April 6, 1626, after all offices and providing for his children's future, Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondi entered the Oratory.

wrote his letters to the missionaries scattered in the various houses-"family" or "famigliola"; or again-as he would write in the Common group of "dear friends." Now, however, it took organizational ability, for it was not automatic to go from missions, albeit well-organized, to a lasting institution. What had just been born had to structure itself as a community

1. *Between October 20 and December 22, 1625, Vincent left the de Gondi palace for good to reside at the Bons-Enfants.* In order to fulfill the obligations of the foundation contract, he and his companion, Antoine Portail, had immediately enlisted the help of a third priest to whom they paid 50 scudi annually for collaboration.

This priest - according to Pierre Coste - is most likely to have been Reverend Belin. The latter, chaplain of the de Gondi's castle in Villepreux, together with Vincent and Father Portail, had given his pastoral care to the convicts of Saint-Roch<sup>42</sup> and, later on - as is clear from letters written by Vincent to Luisa - he was a schoolmaster also in Villepreux and took care of the first Daughters of Charity who served in that village.<sup>43</sup> The first three priests of the Mission had thus set to work diligently. The Bons-Enfants were merely the starting point for going to preach missions in the countryside, as Vincent still recalled in 1658.<sup>44</sup>

2. A year after the Mission's founding contract was signed with the de Gondi couple, on April 24, 1626, Monsignor Jean-François de Gondi, brother of the general of the galleys, gave approval to the work that had sprung up within his family:

... we, the archbishop of Paris, have received, commended and approved this contract of foundation ... of certain clergymen to devote themselves to the missions, to catechize, preach and make general confession to the poor people of the fields. And we hereby ... approve that these clergymen shall settle and dwell in this city of Paris, with the undertaking to go on mission in our diocese only in the places which we shall assign to them and after having received our blessing or that of our vicars general. <sup>45</sup>

3. And still a few months later, on September 4, 1626, at the Bons-Enfants, *the act of association of the first four missionaries* was signed before two notaries at Châtelet, "to live together in the manner of a congregation, company or confraternity, and to commit ourselves to the salvation of the poor people of the fields, in accordance with the contract of foundation."<sup>46</sup> Missing among them was Reverend Belin, who was detained in Villepreux by his commitments. In addition to Father Portail, originally from the diocese of Arles, two priests from the diocese of Amiens signed the contract of association: François du Coudray and Jean de La Salle.<sup>47</sup> Despite the cooperation of various priests of good will that had been continuing for nine years, the deed, handwritten

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<sup>42</sup> ABELLY, o. c., t. I, ch. XIV, p. 60.

<sup>43</sup> *SVit* I, 217-218 (Coste I, 288). In a letter dated Dec. 16, 1634, Vincent wrote to him in such words as to suggest that Reverend Belin was indeed the one who was part of the initial group of missionaries: "Do you not know that Our Lord made you a missionary, since you were among those who had the most important part in the conception, maturity, birth and progress of the Mission, and that, if there had been no clear evidence that God wanted you in Villepreux, you would even be in the Mission? For me, I regard it as perpetual and perfect missionary": *SVit* I, 318 (Coste I, 406).

<sup>44</sup> "We used to go all three of us to preach and give the mission from village to village. Leaving we would hand over the key to some neighbor, and we ourselves would beg him to go at night and sleep in the house. And everywhere I would give but one sermon, which I would twist a thousand ways: the one about the fear of God. That's what we used to do. And God meanwhile did what He had planned from all eternity. He accompanied our work with a few blessings, and at such a sight some clergymen asked and obtained to join us": *SVit* X, 360 (Coste XII, 8).

<sup>45</sup> Doc 60: *SVit* XI, 235 (Coste XIII, 202-203).

<sup>46</sup> Doc 61: *SVit* XI, 239-240 (Coste XIII, 203-205).

<sup>47</sup> Brief biographical notes of these first three missionaries in: P. COSTE, *Le grand saint...*, o. c., I, 180.

by François du Coudray, appears as a *convention between Vincent de Paul and these three priests*.

4. The legal act had been followed by a small *spiritual pilgrimage to Montmartre*<sup>48</sup> to entrust their common desire for poverty to God. Vincent had been unable to participate in the pilgrimage for health reasons. But he participated wholeheartedly as evidenced by the heartfelt prayer made by him in December 1659 during a conference on poverty:

O Savior of the world, who inspired the Company, in its infancy, when it was composed of only three or four people, with the thought of going to Montmartre (the wretch speaking there was then indisposed) to recommend to God, through the intercession of the holy martyrs, that they might practice poverty, and from then on so well observed by a large part of the community, O Savior of my soul, give us the grace to desire and possess nothing but you.<sup>49</sup>

5. A few months later, *four more members joined* the small group. In the diversity of their temperaments, Vincent's first seven companions were all men of quality:<sup>50</sup> Antoine Portail, François du Coudray and Jean de La Salle-the first three; Jean Bécu, Antoine Lucas, Jean Brunet and Jean Dehorgny-the other four.

In the 1625 contract it was specified that, upon joining the Company, one was to divest himself of all ecclesiastical benefices, offices and dignities, in order to live solely from the common treasury. On the very day the deed of association was signed, Vincent irrevocably donated all his paternal property to his brothers and nephews.<sup>51</sup>

Two other gestures complete the picture. In 1626, on leaving Clichy, Vincent ceded the parish for four years to his successor, Jean Souillard, for 400 liras annually; and the following year, he gave up the college of Bons-Enfants, received in a personal capacity, to transfer the property to the Community; on June 8, 1627, the archbishop of Paris issued the decree of union; and on July 15, Vincent took possession of the Bons-Enfants on behalf of the Congregation of the Priests of the Mission.<sup>52</sup>

6. In May 1627 the king signed the letters patent granting legal existence to the congregation.<sup>53</sup> However, to take effect they had to be countersigned by the Paris parliament as well. But strangely enough, three years had to pass before parliament ratified them. After all, that small handful of priests was very little, but it had aroused the opposition of the Paris parish priests who wanted written assurances in the royal patents that these priests would not expect to share benefits with them when they did services in the parishes.<sup>54</sup> About the gratuitousness of their ministries there was already a guarantee in the foundation contract: but it was evidently not considered sufficient.<sup>55</sup> In fact three years would pass before parliament recorded these letters patent from the king. On Feb. 15, 1630, Louis XIII signed new ones requesting ratification of those of 1627;<sup>56</sup> and in the text it is alleged that the reason for the delay was due to the missionaries who "because

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<sup>48</sup> On the Montmartre mound (hill of the martyrs) as early as 475 a chapel was built in memory of the martyrdom of St. Dionysius, the first bishop of Paris, and the other anonymous martyrs of the persecutions. In the 12th century an abbey of Benedictine nuns was built, which was destroyed at the time of the French Revolution. All that remains of the ancient abbey is the Church of Saint-Pierre, and today the Basilica of the Sacred Heart stands on the site of the ancient abbey. It has always been a place of special call to faith for the Christian people of Paris.

<sup>49</sup> *SVit* X, 655 (Coste XII, 411).

<sup>50</sup> *SVit* I, 28, note 3; 30, note 1; XI, 255 (Coste I, 32. 34. 44).

<sup>51</sup> *SVit* XI, 67-68 (Coste XIII, 61-63).

<sup>52</sup> *SVit* XI, 244-249 (Coste XIII, 208-214).

<sup>53</sup> *SVit* XI, 240-242 (Coste XIII, 206-208).

<sup>54</sup> *SVit* XI, 270 (Coste XIII, 227).

<sup>55</sup> P.COSTE, *Le grand saint ... o.c.* I, 182-183.

<sup>56</sup> *SVit* XI, 269-270 (Coste XIII, 227).

of their ordinary occupations and various impediments that had occurred to them" had not submitted the request for ratification within the time frame of the law. But the registration of the letters patent could hardly depend on the beneficiaries themselves who had every interest in the approval! The excuse concealed something else

It was precisely in June 1628 that St. Vincent had made request to Urban VIII, through the apostolic nuncio in France, to grant the Community the prerogatives of a new religious institute, asking that the Congregation of the Mission be exempt from the jurisdiction of the bishops and depend directly on the Holy See. However, the request received a flat refusal.<sup>57</sup> How come? It is likely that Cardinal de Bérulle played a negative role. In 1628 he had written to Father Bertin-his representative Rome-that he saw "in the affair of the Mission" the fruit of "obscure maneuvers" and regarded the project with suspicion, judging it to be outside "the prudence and simplicity" that agree "in the conduct of the affairs God."<sup>58</sup> At that time Bérulle was at the height of celebrity and it is plausible-as Fr. Coste considered-that he made his voice heard and was listened to. His attitude is puzzling, for he was well acquainted with the simplicity and uprightness of Vincent. Perhaps he saw in the development of the Mission a competitor for the Oratory and must have been displeased with his former disciple's detachment from him. The supposition of this contrast is confirmed by the fact that, after his death, the Oratorians continued to obstruct the Rome Mission, although the superior general, Father de Condren, had disapproved of them. In a letter to Father du Coudray dated July 12, 1632, Vincent said he was astonished at "these maneuvers" and begged him not to give in to feelings of revenge:

I beg you, Father, to behave in the most Christian way possible with those who create obstacles for us. I meet them here often and, thanks be to God, I treat them cordially as I did before; and it seems to me, by the grace of God, that I do not feel any aversion for them, on the contrary I honor and love them more. I will also tell you that I have not yet complained about this, not even to Reverend de Gondi, so as not to upset him in his vocation.<sup>59</sup>

At the end of these vicissitudes, on January 12, 1633, Urban VIII signed the Bull *Salvatoris Nostri*, by which he approved and erected the Congregation. In it all the requests contained in the 1628 supplication were accepted, the one that had then been dryly rejected.

## **AFTER FOUR HUNDRED YEARS, WE BEGIN AGAIN**

St. Vincent was not afraid to say that it is better for the Mission Company to perish and die if it is no longer pleasing to God:

"God has set his eyes on this little Company for the service of his Church, if we can even call Company a handful of men, poor by birth, by science and by virtue, the scum, trash and refuse of the world. I pray to God, two or three times a day, that he may annihilate us if we are not useful to his glory."<sup>60</sup>

Similar observation is a provocation to our identity. We exist to manifest the glory of the God of Jesus as the Father who offers himself to human freedom to be recognized as "Infinite Tenderness" toward each of his creatures. This vocational witness must become increasingly clear in an age of profound *anthropological transition in society*. If

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<sup>57</sup> *SVit* XI, 267 (Coste XIII, 225).

<sup>58</sup> cited in P. COSTE, *Le grand saint ... o.c.* I, 185.

<sup>59</sup> *SVit* I, 123 (Coste I, 163).

<sup>60</sup> *SVit* X, 2 (Coste XI, 2).

once misery was rooted in the peasant world today that world, at least in the West, is no more. Another kind of poverty, far less visible, has taken over: *poverty of the spirit within the secularization of society*. And so the apostolic zeal of the congregation, in order to be faithful to its mission, is called to register with these new scenarios to find ways to implant the glad tidings of the Gospel in them.

## 1. HINTS ON THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL CONDITION OF OUR TIME

In general terms it can be said that in the northern hemisphere of the world inhabited by us, material well-being has grown, but at the same time also the discomfort of an age in which what is properly "human" has been deteriorating. It is on this point that I would like to dwell and attempt, in a phenomenological key, to capture almost in a photographic flash the state of mind of contemporary man, because only by intercepting this situation does the evangelical proclamation of the love of charity, which, by vocation, we are called to witness in the world, gain meaning.

### 1. Desert in the soul, saddened in individualistic self-realization

The world as it has come to be defined in this beginning of the Third Millennium is dominated by science and technology and, as its effect, has produced can be described as a condition of the *desert of the soul*. It is as if the consciousness of contemporary man is lost in the desert of life, with no appreciable horizon and no compass of orientation, dominated by skepticism and relativism. One "survives" within a world closed in on itself. And by dint of unbridled globalization such a condition tends to erode even the culture of the poorest.

The men of the "countryside," whom St. Vincent felt were "his burden and his pain," no longer exist. There are other men living in increasingly dense urban agglomerations, gathered in a complex social network, where with the waning of ideologies the individual endures, but increasingly alone and bewildered about the future. The "condition of the human" that has been constituting itself is hinted at in those partially or entirely "tattooed" bodies of young people with which they intend to assert their "singularity" in front of everyone. Thus, in the "urbanized" society, a mentality of *individualistic self-referentiality* has been taking hold, which is amplified as the dominant feeling of life in the younger generation.

Similar self-referentiality is driven by two "secularist dogmas": self-assertion (*or will to power* and, with the advent of the digital, as the *"quest to appear"*: *"I exist if I appear and gain acclaim"*) and the quest for self-satisfaction (*or pleasure and enjoyment principle*). But the joy of achievement and the satisfaction of commitment are the *consequence of meaningful human performance, and not the object of intention*, which can be sought as an end. So that when one seeks it as an "object of intention," that is, when one seeks it *directly*, one fails the goal, since any spasmodic pursuit of pleasure only nullifies pleasure itself. Nor is it enough to want it in order to "be happy." *Self-realization and self-satisfaction* are mere *derivatives* of man's primary interest in *wanting to exist meaningfully*. That's it: what has failed today is "the meaning" of existing. Or rather it is hijacked in directions that are dead ends. The most sensitive literature in the field, including secular, is quite unanimous<sup>61</sup> in recognizing that *the principle of individualist self-realization* (in its various versions of enjoyment or power), *posited as*

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<sup>61</sup> V. LINGIARDI, *Arcipelago N. Variazioni sul narcisismo*, Einaudi, Turin 2021; G.PIETROPOLI CHARMET, *L'insostenibile bisogno di ammirazione*, Laterza, Bari 2019; P.A. SEQUERI, *La cruna dell'ego, uscire dal monoteismo del Sé*, Vita e pensiero, Milan 2017; P.A. SEQUERI, *The Entrustment of the Ego*, Opere III, Vita e Pensiero, Milan 2024.

*the radical antecedent of consciousness in its desire to "be," becomes destructive of the human.*

## **2. Existential spacing and disaffection among humans: contiguous, but distant**

A second element to consider is that this situation generates as the "prevailing feeling of life" an *existential bewilderment*. There is a feeling that everything is falling apart in one's hands. The problem is how to hold something together in a world that is increasingly mobile, complex, and at the same time confused because it has been uprooted from secure cultural references and a unified and meaningful feeling of life. Moreover, the massive advent of digitization has produced an "accelerated" society that produces hyperactive people who lack a unifying center. The stresses are continuous and it is as if one is always summoned, demanded, solicited from somewhere other than where one is from time to time. One is no longer "here and now," but "here and everywhere"; however, one who is always everywhere, is never anywhere. In the end, it is a suffering that touches everyone: and it particularly affects generational replacements.

Educational places, which should preside over the "transmission of the deserving meaning of life" (family, school, political society, church), have become institutional rather than attractive places of interest, whose *activities work, but it is not clear why they should work*. It only takes nothing for everything to melt away. It is a time of "nihilism" in the sense that secularist culture tends to subtract meaning from what is done. As a result, relationships and ties with others, which form the vibrant fabric of human living, have thinned.

A psychiatrist, Luigi Zoja,<sup>62</sup> expressed-in a small volume entitled "The Death of the Neighbor"-the following thesis: "At the end of the nineteenth century, Nietzsche had announced that God is dead. Having also passed the twentieth century, it is before everyone's eyes that the neighbor is also dead. ... The times following the death of God have sometimes been called post-theological or post-religious. For the present ones no name has yet been found. An unwelcome possibility would be to have to call them "post-human times." ... Man has fallen into a fundamental loneliness. He is an orphan without precedent in history. The other is no longer "the neighbor," but a distant and foreign reality: *each individual lives, yes, in dense contiguity with other individuals, but interpersonal relations are disjointed and interpreted in the light of a new perspective, unknown in the past, namely "distance."* In the modern era we meet more and more, but so quickly that *the other is only brushed past*. Thus, he or she is established the dishabituation to an "affective proximity," in which *one no longer reckons with the positive energy of interpersonal ties and relationships*, namely with the free recognition of the other as worthy of one's gaze and amiability, not because he arouses some interest, but only for the sake of knowing that he exists and shares the drama of existence. The neighbor is thus transformed into "remote" or distant or foreign.<sup>63</sup> The consequence of

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<sup>62</sup> L. ZOJA, *The death of the neighbor*, Einaudi, Turin 2009.

<sup>63</sup> BYUNG-CHUL HAN, *The Expulsion of the Other*, ed. Nottetempo, Milan 2017, whose thesis can be summarized in these terms: The time when there was the Other is gone. The Other as mystery, the Other as seduction, the Other as attraction, the Other as desire, the Other as difference, the Other as pain: it has disappeared. The Equal is proliferating, giving rise to pathological changes that infest the social body. And making it sick are not prohibition and prohibition, but hyper-communication and hyper-consumption; not removal and denial, but permissiveness and the need for self-assertion. ... The all-pervasiveness of the Net and total digital communication do not facilitate encounters with others; rather, they serve to find the Equal and those who have the same opinion as us, leaving aside the different and the other and making our horizon of experience ever narrower. ... In fact, only the encounter with the Other, the Different, destabilizing and

this situation is a new poverty, that of the soul, the general climate of which is a feeling of irrelevance and bewilderment."

### 3. Signs of an altered and human consciousness

Some widespread attitudes and behaviors confirm this condition of life for the people of our time.

a) We live in *a time in which technique functions more and more, but in a way that is increasingly detached from meanings*, and by "meanings" we mean the elaboration of the meaning of the actions that are performed, the relationships that are experienced, and the meanings that are constructed through symbolic mediations. Technique is not interested in saying anything about the contents and meanings that live up to the dignity of human life: any meaning is permissible, as long as it works (relativism). The meaning of life is left to the individual. But in the meantime, the individual, if he does not want to succumb, must adapt to being "more and more functioning." In this way man feels crushed within species a social assembly line that makes him frustrated. And so he loses the taste for commitment and the attraction of building the common good.

(b) We live in *a time of communication with increasingly fast and enveloping tools, but this greatly accentuates the emotional dimension of feeling*. People are less and less interested in reasoning. About any discourse (statement and/or image), the criterion of truth is represented by "feeling" something, by feeling an emotion, not instead by the sensibility, reasonableness, argued plausibility, and ethicality of what is stated and done. It is enough to see the degradation to which television news programs have been reduced: devoured by the rush to give the news that hits, they gloss over the possibility of some reasoning or in-depth observation, becoming the catwalk of the opposing opinions of those in power, relating even sighs about them. The criterion of appreciation is feeling caught up in a fascinating image or experience, which is then abandoned perhaps an instant later. People especially young people are fascinated by what has been called a "pure relationship," that is, the encounter between people without "a before" and without "an after"; an encounter that could even last forever, but what matters -- and needs to be safeguarded -- is that the individual is free of ties and commitments. *The stability is there as long as the emotion lasts*. This is at the root of the psychological fragility of so many young people, as they do not understand that a bond is a guarantee of affection, while they perceive bonds as taking vitality away from the emotionality of affection.

(c) This is why ours has also been called *"the age of sad passions."* By this expression, taken from the reflections of Baruch Spinoza, we mean that ours is no longer the age of enthusiasm for the future, but rather the age of retreat and implosion of expectations, in a kind of "self-referential narcissism" in the pursuit of enjoyment crushed on the present, as an attempt to escape what has been called "the disturbing guest": the nihilism or agnosticism that inhabits the souls of so many of our contemporaries, and especially of the young.<sup>64</sup>

The rationalization process of the West, *bent on satisfying needs and optimizing desires*, has reduced ethics to utilitarianism, the search for what is right to hedonism, and

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enlivening, can give each person his or her own identity and generate real experience. The essay closes by emphasizing the urgency of building human communities based on listening and openness to the Other.

<sup>64</sup> U. GALIMBERTI, *The Disturbing Guest. Nihilism and the Young*, Feltrinelli, Milan 2008: "Nihilism. There is no point in putting it at the door, because, everywhere, it has already been lurking invisibly for some time. What is needed is to become aware of this guest and look it squarely in the face" (M. Heidegger).

ultimately transformed the subject into the individual. We experience this loss daily, which is summed up in the inability of reason to serve anything other than the operation of a cog that has become an end in itself ("bureaucracy in power").

## **2. OPENING SOME PERSPECTIVES FOR THE RENEWAL OF OUR MISSION OF EVANGELICAL CHARITY**

This description clearly should not be absolutized, and yet it roughly photographs the perception that many people we meet have of themselves. They may not say so, but the *certainty of belonging to a Good Design for themselves and their loved ones* is sidelined and surrounded by doubt or skepticism. Which means that the Gospel needs to be re-announced in the simplicity of its content.

Describing these trend lines, the question arises: how do we position ourselves in our apostolate within this condition in which most of the men who have abandoned the faith find themselves? How to act? The question may appear disconsolate and unanswerable. But if at first glance *the sense of powerlessness* that one may feel tends to discourage, it is necessary to refer back to the fundamental method that animated St. Vincent, namely, that it is from our littleness and poverty that God makes his way in the world.<sup>65</sup>

By adopting this criterion we attempt to open up some *sèiraglio* of perspective by *reinterrogating* ourselves on our "way" of *proclaiming the Gospel and practicing charity*, which are the two identifying poles of the Vincentian vocation

### **1. FIRST PERSPECTIVE: REPOSITORIES AND BEARERS OF MEANING THAT ILLUMINATES LIFE**

We still carry on our shoulders the residue of an overly intellectualistic view of the faith typical of the *societas christiana tramontata*, which was transmitted through a moralistic or exemplary type of doctrine, that is, indicating duties with which to engage, while in the first instance the Gospel is "glad tidings" that enlightens the meaning of human existence and directs its destination. Among the many Vincentian texts, one of the most succinct, which characterize our vocation as priests of the Mission, assigns us the task of being fervent witnesses of God's love for his creatures and love for mankind:

Our vocation is to go ... all over the earth. And to do what? To inflame the hearts of men, doing what the Son of God did, he who came to bring fire into the world to inflame it with his love (*cf.* Lk 12:49). What can we desire but that he should burn and consume everything? My beloved brethren, let us reflect, please. It is therefore true that I am sent not only to love God, but to make him loved. It is not enough for me to love God if my neighbor does not love him. I must love my neighbor as the image of God and the object of his love; and do everything so that in their turn men may love their Creator who knows them and regards them as his brothers, who has saved them; and procure that, with mutual charity, they may love one another for the sake of God, who loved them so much that he gave up his own Son for them to death. This, then, is my duty.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> "Do you want to know why we fail in some offices? Because we rely on ourselves. That preacher, that superior, that confessor relies too much on his own prudence, science and intelligence. What does God do? He withdraws from him, he abandons him, and although he works, all that he does produces no fruit. And this is so that he recognizes his uselessness and learns from his own experience that, whatever his abilities, he can do nothing without God."- *SVit* X, 31 (Coste XI, 38-39); *cf.* *SVit* IV, 285-286; "The good that God wills is done almost of itself without our thinking about it. ... Thus have arisen all the works in which we now find ourselves engaged. And none of this was done of our own design, but God, who wanted to be served on such occasions, brought them into being, Himself, insensibly; and He used us without our knowing where He would lead us. It is for this reason that we let Him do it, far from giving ourselves solicitude for the development, much less the beginning of these works."- *SVit* IV, 100-101.

<sup>66</sup> *SVit* X, 547 (Coste XII, 262).

This task description of our Vincentian vocation should be the north star that orients our ministry to God's people. In its essence it is identified with *generating hope for life in the consciousness of poor people*, based on the fact that we are anchored in the generous love with which God cares for his children. And this we are called to make explicit through the words of preaching and works of charity.

On this point we need to make a good distinction between our commitment and the result. In a letter from 1658 St. Vincent told Father Anthony Fleury:

"God only asks to cast the nets into the sea, and not to catch the fish, because it is up to him to get them into the net. He will. If, throughout the night, despite the difficulties of the undertaking and the hardness of hearts, almost everyone is asleep for the things of God you wait patiently for the day to dawn and for the sun of righteousness to awaken them and its light to enlighten and warm them. To this work and patience must be added humility, prayers and good example."<sup>67</sup>

On this general orientation, I propose two insights: to be witnesses of hope in created life and to raise the existential questions that sleep in the human heart.

### **Overcoming a de-eschatologized evangelical proclamation**

When the Gospel proclaims, "I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly" (Jn. 10:10) and "This is the will of my Father: that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him may have eternal life" (Jn. 6:40), we remain mute, without a jolt of conscience, because we have a *de-eschatologized preaching*, emptied of the future. The future no longer presses into the present. And "eternal life" is reduced to something indefinite and aerial "about the Hereafter" left to everyone's imagination, while it points to the good destination of human existence

Father De Lubac wrote: "We must be grateful to the Church because she continually reminds us .... that the hereafter is that Eternal installed at the heart of all temporal development which he animates and directs. It is the true Present, without which the present is but elusive dust. If the men of today are so tragically absent to one another it is, first of all, because they are absent to themselves, having deserted that Eternal which alone roots them in being and enables them to communicate with one another."<sup>68</sup>

If secularized culture skeptically points to the "failure of human existence in cosmic nothingness" as the ultimate horizon, the Gospel proclaims that every story of freedom lived in justice that man builds is not lost, but is in the good hands of God the Creator, who "wills that all be saved" (1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9), so that every moment of life lived in self-dedication is already "eternal life." The insistence of John's Gospel in indicating that Jesus is "the life" traces this experience of faith delivered in the Gospel canon.

The early Christians differed from their contemporaries because they carried imprinted in their souls *the experience of a happy relationship with Jesus* who had been for them the exhaustive answer to all questions about existence. *It was this experience that made them live*, for He alone had "words of eternal life" (Jn. 6:68). Our proclamation then is to make visible through words and deeds this relationship of unsurpassed love with Christ, where personal poverty, whether bodily or moral, is not a hindrance, but a condition for the attraction of an even greater love from God (Rom 8:35).

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<sup>67</sup> Coste VII, 343.

<sup>68</sup> H. DE LUBAC, *Catholicism*, Opera Omnia, VII, Jaca Book, Milan 1979, p. 276.

It may be difficult, but this is the deep core of our faith that must sprinkle the meaning of our lives and our mission in today's world. And the yardstick should not be the result of it, but the transparency of the gesture by which we witness to it. Only around this core of witness do the tools and means that can be suggested and the solidaristic practice of helping our brothers and sisters in charity acquire meaning.

### **What is urgently needed in a gospel proclamation is to have it preceded by a solicitation of the human question**

The next passage I would like to bring to our attention concerns the method by which to make this proclamation of a good destination effective in the minds of people today. Christological *Revelation becomes interesting to the extent that it responds to a human demand for meaning*. Any statement in fact generates interest if it is supported by a questioning expectation as Reinhold Niebuhr observed.

"Nothing is as incredible as *the answer to a question that is not asked*. Half the world considered the Christian answer to the problem of life and history to be 'folly,' only because they had no questions to which Christian Revelation was the answer, no desires or hopes that that Revelation would fulfill."<sup>69</sup>

Man is a tireless seeker of meaning, and of the ultimate meaning of existence. He is a questioning being who loves to know. And to know the whole. As a higher animal he could eat, drink, defend himself from the cold, work, assert himself, reproduce: these are primary needs of man as "biology." But man is "man" because he asks the question, "Why do I exist when I might not?" Man is characterized because he questions himself and the destiny of himself, of his loved ones, of the world; because he is nourished by free and free affections, showing that he has a spiritual dimension. The question of meaning, and exhaustive meaning, is subject to the characteristic operation of human reason.

It should be noted, however, that the kind of human reason that can answer these questions is a rationality that is open and sensitive to the world of the spirit. And therefore, one cannot demand—as our technically pervaded age would have it—the answer to this question through an "analytical-scientific reason." Such reason seeks to answer the search for "how" things are made and how they can be "used" to one's advantage, but it does not have sufficient penetration to grasp the "human meaning" of those same things.<sup>70</sup> And it is *on principle* that analytical and empirical science cannot answer existential questions, which, by the way, are the most important to living humanly, because if a person does not have a horizon of meaning to live by, he or she feels dying of worthlessness. If Christianity does not reach by this route to people today, it cannot scratch the layer of indifference generated by the nihilistic culture.

### **In this context what more urgent task for the Vincentian mission?**

It is within this human subsoil that "gospel proclamation" should work in order to be meaningful. That is, it is a matter of being clear *about the connection between the human condition and the Gospel*. It is from this connection that the Gospel proclamation

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<sup>69</sup> R. NIEBUHR, *Fate and History, Anthology of the Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr, edited by E. Buzzi*, BUR, Milan 1999, p. 66. U. H. VON BALTHASAR, *Spiritus Creator, Spiritus Creator, Theological Essays*, Works vol. XXII, Jaca book-Morcelliana, Milan 2017, p. 248, also suggests, "*Where the problem fails, the answer no longer has a chance to hit the mark*. If Christendom no longer formulates the question together with the world (indeed, it does not pose it in a deeper and more urgent way than this) it will not even know how to formulate God's answer as it is interpreted and how it should be interpreted."

<sup>70</sup> "It is precisely because the great answers are not within the reach of our minds," the philosopher Norberto Bobbio observes, "that man remains a religious being, despite all the processes of demythicization, of secularization, of all the affirmations of the death of God that characterize the modern and even more so the contemporary age. ... The need for an answer to these questions is there, simply because these questions are there. Which explains the power of religion. It is not enough to say: religion is there, but it should not be there. There is! Why is there? Because science gives partial answers and philosophy asks questions without giving answers": N. Bobbio, *Che cosa fanno oggi i filosofi*, Bompiani, Milan 1982, p. 167. 175.

shows its power. And, if I may be allowed to succinctly show the nub of this connection between human life and the Gospel, I observe that the central content of the Christological proclamation is that God - the Mystery, from which everything originates and of which He, the Son, is an integral part (Mt 11:27=Lk 10:22) -, is loving his Creation and does not want to lose it in the most absolute way. In order not to lose her to His embrace He asks the Son to penetrate there where the human mind most suffers doubt and perplexity about Him, namely, the innocent pain and sorrow; and the Son immerses Himself in it, *in order to transform that contradiction into revelation*, that is, into the manifestation of His most tender Affection for the creature.<sup>71</sup> This is the Gospel answer to the human creature's question of meaning, but if man does not ask the question, insignificant will be the answer.

Gospel proclamation today, in the act of being proclaimed, must first leaven people's minds to make contact with the elementary questions of their deepest soul and desire. Only then can the faith option, with the grace of the Spirit, become interesting.

## **2. SECOND PERSPECTIVE: REAPPROPRIATING THE *AGAPIC* PRINCIPLE IN THE VOCATION**

A further reflection that may open up in the revitalization of our Vincentian vocation is to *revive the Gospel proclamation with the witness of charity*. The reason is that "self-love" - proclaimed by ancient Roman culture and subterraneously recognized even by certain ecclesiastical culture with the motto *Caritas incipit ab egone* - does not correspond to the order of affections that governs humanity as God intended it to be. *In fact, man, according to the order of creation, exists as an "affection for others," since this is the human original* in that it reflects God's "fabric of being." Some theologians call this original ontological propensity "proexistence," that is, existing for the sake of others. That is, man exists according to the dignity of his humanity insofar as he "is for others" or in favor of others, since in this way he is a reflection of God-Agape (1 John 4:8, 16).

### **The confusion between charity and solidarity**

Now the missionary's charitable vocation must be nourished by this agapic principle, becoming ever more deeply aware that the valuing gaze of the other has the power to "make him be" and "generate life" in him, since man lives by the recognition, appreciation and esteem he receives. Even and especially the poor man must "actively" perceive this principle in the Vincentian who approaches him. Without it, the charitable relationship is impoverished and loses its enchantment. Vincent expresses this clearly, saying that the "way" by which the Mission proclaims God is through love

"We are chosen by God as instruments of his immense and fatherly charity. God raised up this little Company, like all the others, to love him and do his will. All, in fact tend to love him, but they love him in different ways: the Carthusians by solitude, the Capuchins by poverty, others by singing his praises; and *we, brothers, through love*. We are to show it by leading the people to love God and neighbor, to love neighbor for God and God for

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<sup>71</sup> "Let us observe the Son of God. What a heart of charity! What a flame of love! O my Jesus, tell me a little, I pray thee, who snatched thee from heaven to come and suffer the curses of earth, so many persecutions and torments that thou hast suffered there? O Savior! O source of love humbled to the point of lowering yourself to us and enduring infamous torment, who loved your neighbor more than you? You came to expose yourself to all our miseries, taking on the form of a sinner and leading a life of affliction to the point of suffering an ignominious death for us. Is there such a love? Who could love in such a sublime way? There is none but Our Lord who was so rapt with love for creatures that He left His Father's throne to come and take a body subjected to infirmity. ... This is the love that crucified him and accomplished the wondrous work of our redemption": SVit X, 549 (Coste XII, 264-265).

neighbor. We are chosen by God as instruments of his immense and paternal charity, which he wishes to establish and expand in souls."<sup>72</sup>

In this area, the emphasis on charity as a virtue of behavioral ethics characteristic of our age of secularization-and, consequently, its reduction to mere "solidarity," leaving its "theological" root in the shade-does not measure up to evangelical charity. The risk of this reduction is not only theoretical, as secularization has corroded the fabric of faith. It is necessary to defend and assimilate that the principle of *evangelical charity is Christological: "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat!"* (Mt 25:31-46). Such evidence may not even be known-as the Matthias passage suggests-but always Jesus Christ is the referent of the charitable act, for as St. Vincent says, "one serves the person of Our Lord in his poor members! And he considers such service as done to himself."<sup>73</sup>

Without charity love, gestures lose their deep core of truth.

In such a perspective the proper interpretation of the vocation to charity toward the poor needs to be revived.<sup>74</sup> There has been too much yielding and dwelling on the idea of charity as a good and supportive work, depriving it, however, of evangelical agape and replacing it with a good dose of altruistic sentimentality. The Gospel proclamation passes through charity, not because this is a fine example showing off to "new pagans" to entice them to believe, but because "loving one's neighbor" is the vital dynamic of the God revealed by Jesus. Losing oneself benevolently for the other in the Gospel dictate is not the heroic act of out-of-the-ordinary generosity, it is instead the authentic way of being according to the humanity that Jesus introduced into history.

### **The time has come when faith must be united with the witness of charity**

God's charity, reflected in the authentic human, is more than ever today an appreciable object of witness. *The evangelizing mode, to which today's world is sensitive, passes through the love of charity* toward the brethren. In this way, evangelization is no longer just words, but a reality lived in affection toward others.<sup>75</sup> It is therefore necessary to become aware of the *witnessing power of charity*, for in it is reflected the heart of Jesus' human action as it was experienced by the disciples and transposed in the New Testament canon in describing his action: "God anointed in the Holy Spirit and power Jesus of Nazareth, *who passed by benefiting and healing* all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him" (Acts 10:38).

Christological Revelation has revealed to us God's proximity to the human creature by means of an unprecedented paradigm in the religious relationship with Him, namely: in the face of the universal history of religions in which it is a basic principle that

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<sup>72</sup> *SVit X*, 547 (Coste XII, 262).

<sup>73</sup> *SVit IX* 99 (Coste IX, 118); "My daughters, you can do all the good you want, but if you do not do it well, it will profit you nothing. St. Paul taught us this. You may give your goods to the poor, but if you do not have charity, that gesture is a nullity; yes, even if you give your very life. Dear sisters, you must do as the Son of God did, who did nothing except for the love he had for God, his Father. So for you, coming to *Charity*, the end must be to come to it solely out of pure love of God and to please him; and as long as you live in it, all your acts must tend to this same love. ... What is the use of bringing soup or medicine to the poor, if the motive of this act is not love?": *SVit IX*, 22-23 (Coste IX, 20).

<sup>74</sup> "In the person of the poor you serve Jesus Christ, and this is true, as it is true that we are here. A nun will go ten times a day to visit the sick, and ten times a day she will find God there. As St. Augustine says, what we see is not so sure, because our senses can deceive us; but God's truths never deceive. Go and visit the poor forced into chains, you will find God there; serve the children, you will find God there": *SVit IX*, 194 (Coste IX, 252).

<sup>75</sup> "A heart, truly inflamed and animated by charity, makes its ardor felt, and everything found in a charitable man exhales and preaches charity." *SVit X*, 67 (Coste XI, 76); "If their [the preachers'] words bring grace, it is because if they apply them, they hear them and are moved by them for the first; and by such means they succeed in inflaming others" (*SVit X*, 132 (Coste XI, 151); "If it is true that we are called to carry far and near the love of God, if we are to set the nations ablaze, if our calling is to go and spread this divine fire throughout the world, if so, I say, if so, brethren, how much I myself must burn with this divine fire! How much must I be inflamed to love those with whom I live, how much must I edify my brethren by the exercise of love, and how much must I strive to persuade them to practice the acts of charity!" *SVit X*, 548 (Coste XII, 263).

it is man who must sacrifice himself for God, the Glad Tidings of Jesus manifests the Father intent on showing Himself as the One who sacrifices Himself for His creature. This form of Christological Revelation is not a mere "theological school" statement, but is the substratum of Jesus' human way of being and acting. Man's sacrifice for God is certainly noble, religiously admirable, but it does not have the flavor of a novel revelation. It goes without saying. It is normal. Whereas the striking Gospel formula is that God sacrifices himself for man. This is the unheard-of core of the Gospel, and therefore of the proclamation, which not only must be proclaimed but must become the principle on which a missionary's life consciousness and preaching concretely unfolds.

Consequently, it is in the witnessing reproduction of this form in one's concrete history that evangelization takes place. Probably, in the Vincentian world, there is a *hermeneutical deficiency in understanding the relationship between evangelization and charity*, since they are normally interpreted as successive or at least parallel moments, whereas the proclamation of the Gospel and the love of charity coincide, inasmuch as where the joyful proclamation of the love of God makes a breach in a conscience, there the charitable gesture is also born. The discovery of being loved becomes the womb in which solidarity with others flourishes. And being loved makes one stand with infinite humility toward the other, for God's love flows through us like a subtle breath of undeserved affection, of which one realizes that it cannot be held simply for oneself.

### **Evangelization in charity through the five virtues**

If in fact we went to analyze (beyond linguistic *clichés*) where the five virtues of the missionary aim, we would see that - as Vincent teaches - they descend from identification with Jesus' human way of being and acting. In these virtues - as a result of a centuries-old moralistic climate of religiosity - there seems to have been a sagging of interpretation in terms of ethical behavior, rather than as existential attitudes of the believing conscience.

St. Vincent understood it, lived it and transmitted it. A single expression of his, almost untranslatable because of its beauty in the original language, can become "an anthropological code" to be activated to match our humanity as missionaries to our particular vocational call to live by charity:

" Il est certain que la charité, quand elle habite dans une âme, occupe entièrement toutes ses puissances : point de repos ; c est un feu qui agit sans cesse ; il tient toujours en haleine, toujours en action la personne qui en est une fois embrasée " (Coste XI, 215-216).

"It is certain that charity, when it takes possession of a soul, absorbs its energies entirely. It gives no respite: it is like fire that stirs without interruption, always keeping in exercise and activity the person who is gripped by it" (*SVit* XI, 187).

Being charitable is thus a way of being of our personality when it is shaped by the spirit of charity. The operational modes of charity are a consequence of this.

"Missionaries, more than all other priests, must be filled with the spirit of compassion, being obliged by their state and vocation to serve the most wretched, the most abandoned and the most oppressed by bodily and spiritual miseries. First of all, *they should feel moved to the living and afflicted in their hearts by the miseries of their neighbor*. Second, *this sorrow and compassion must appear externally on their faces, following the example of Our Lord who wept over the city of Jerusalem, which was threatened by calamities*. Third, one must use compassionate words that show the neighbor that we feel his joys and sorrows as our own. Finally, *we must succor and assist him as far as we can in his*

*needs and miseries, seeking to deliver him in whole or in part, for the hand must, as far as possible, conform to the heart.* <sup>76</sup>

Without this particular mild gaze of loving charity toward the poor, made up of gentleness, tenderness, simplicity and humility, which constitute the typical sensibility of his "spirit," the *commitment to the poor does not attain the form of Christian charity according to that charismatic light that is proper to the Vincentian experience.*

It is this kind of charity that irrigates our presence alongside our brothers and sisters in missionary proclamation and makes it interesting in a time when the search for meaning and the ultimate meaning of life is almost obliterated.

### **3. REFOCUSING THE MISSIONARY "SUBJECT"**

In conclusion of these suggestions, it seems to me that the decisive point in order to effectively live out the memory of the 400th anniversary of the birth of the Congregation is to *put the missionary subject back on axis.* The various proclamations of renewal in their generality resonate in a vacuum as long as *the subject that receives them is weak and fragile.* After all, this is what St. Vincent sought when, for example, he exhorted, "Give me *a man* of prayer and he will be capable of everything."<sup>77</sup> Vincent calls for "a man" for the mission, that is, "a subject," who is enamored in his relationship with God revealed in Jesus and animated by the desire to communicate him, for "God does not want to be met coldly or without enthusiasm, but with all the strength and all the ardor of the will, for he desires to communicate himself to us."<sup>78</sup>

If in a doctrinal key everything can be clear, in an existential and vital perspective, on the other hand, everything is always to be taken up, and everything is always at the beginning. And this happens if the spiritual sensibility is touched by desire, which is energy of transcendence, able to drag and move from indifference. Therefore, it is a matter of regaining a "renewed missionary desire" by putting the formation of consciences in missionary and charitable perspective back in the pipeline

O Savior, O my good Savior, deign by Your divine Goodness to deliver the Mission from the spirit of indolence and the pursuit of its own comforts. Deign to give it a burning zeal for Your glory, that it may embrace everything with joy, and never neglect an opportunity to serve You! We are destined for this. And a missionary, an authentic missionary, a man of God, a man who has the spirit of God, must find everything good and indifferent. He embraces everything, he can do everything! With stronger reason, a company, a congregation can everything, if it is animated and led by the spirit of God.<sup>79</sup>

### **BRIEF QUESTIONNAIRE FOR INITIATING REFLECTION**

1. To what extent is the recovery of our vocation linked to the experience of the Spirit's grace, or is it entrusted to the goodwill of a commitment? Do we put more trust in planning than in the signs by which God leads our personal and communal existence? Does the grace of the Spirit sometimes act in us as a spiritual vibration that is not scandalized by our poverty and makes us beggars for God's Mystery in life?

"One must be filled and moved by the spirit of Jesus Christ. To understand this well, you need to know that his spirit is diffused in all Christians who live Christianly. Their actions

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<sup>76</sup> Coste XI, 77.

<sup>77</sup> *SVit*, 77 (Coste XI, 83).

<sup>78</sup> *SVit* IX, 253 (Coste IX, 336)

<sup>79</sup> *SVit* X, 177 (Coste XI, 202)

and works are permeated by the spirit of God, and it is because of his spirit that he raised up the Society, and you see this well. And it is according to this spirit that it must behave. It has in fact always loved the Christian maxims and has desired to clothe itself with the spirit of the Gospel in order to live and work like Our Lord, so that His spirit may shine throughout the Company and in each missionary, in all its works in general and in each one in particular."(SVit X, 431 - Coste XII, 108)

2. Events are a "decisive" ingredient in St. Vincent's spiritual experience; and it is they that guided him in the origin of the Congregation. Is this doctrine still operative in the living and activity of the Mission? Do we allow ourselves to be guided by the events that happen to us or do we expect life to flow according to projects of our minds? Are "events" a theological place around which we build our faith experience or are they random facts that we are forced to undergo?

What great hidden treasures there are in holy Providence! Those who follow it and do not bypass it sovereignly honor Our Lord! I recently heard one of the kingdom's greats say that he had learned this truth well from personal experience, for those few ventures he undertook of his own volition, instead of succeeding well, had always turned against him, to his own detriment (SVit I, 43 - Coste I, 69).

3. In some respects the activities of the congregation come second. In first place is an *animus*, a desire to preach the Gospel. The desire for mission among the people of the countryside was like a spark that was ignited between Madame de Gondi and St. Vincent: the fire was lit by the Holy Spirit. Isn't the problem of the congregation in every age that the missionary desire or zeal continues to spark among us brethren?

"The Mission," wrote St. Vincent to Father Duchesne, reporting the thought of Father Pillé, "is the spirit of the first Christians: it is an entirely apostolic life; it is the supreme and last means that God has found to reform his Church, and it seems that his goodness, wisdom and omnipotence have been exhausted in this masterpiece of his hands. What great designs Providence has on the Mission! What happiness to be a missionary! How glad I am to be one myself, but at the same time how grieved I am to be useless and burdensome!" (SVit II, 284 - Coste II, 335).

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