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"GRATIS"
– A Refrain in Vincent's Writings –

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Abstract

This article examines the recurring theme of **"gratis"** in the writings of Saint Vincent de Paul and argues that it was a foundational principle of his spirituality, missionary strategy, and institutional vision. For Vincent, evangelization and works of charity were to be offered freely, reflecting Christ's command: *"Freely you have received; freely give."* This conviction shaped the organization of the Congregation of the Mission and other Vincentian foundations, requiring stable financial resources so that the poor would never bear the cost of pastoral or charitable services. Drawing on Vincent's correspondence, conferences, foundational documents, and the Common Rules, the study demonstrates that *gratis* was not merely an economic policy but a theological expression of divine charity, evangelical poverty, and missionary freedom. It remains a challenging and prophetic principle for the Vincentian Family, inviting renewed reflection on mission, stewardship, and service to the poor.

Cet article étudie le thème récurrent du **« gratis »** dans les écrits de saint Vincent de Paul et montre qu'il constitue un principe fondamental de sa spiritualité, de sa stratégie missionnaire et de sa vision institutionnelle. Pour saint Vincent, l'évangélisation et les œuvres de charité devaient être offertes gratuitement, conformément à la parole du Christ : *« Vous avez reçu gratuitement, donnez gratuitement. »* Cette conviction a profondément marqué l'organisation de la Congrégation de la Mission et des autres fondations vincentiennes, exigeant des ressources financières stables afin que les pauvres n'aient jamais à payer les services pastoraux ou caritatifs. À partir des lettres, conférences, documents fondateurs et Règles communes de saint Vincent, cette étude montre que le **gratis** n'est pas seulement un principe économique, mais une expression théologique de la charité divine, de la pauvreté évangélique et de la liberté missionnaire. Il demeure aujourd'hui un appel prophétique pour la Famille vincentienne.

Este artículo estudia el tema recurrente del **«gratis»** en los escritos de san Vicente de Paúl y sostiene que constituye un principio fundamental de su espiritualidad, de su estrategia misionera y de su visión institucional. Para san Vicente, la evangelización y las obras de caridad debían ofrecerse gratuitamente, en fidelidad al mandato de Cristo: *«Gratis lo recibisteis; dadlo gratis.»* Esta convicción configuró profundamente la organización de la Congregación de la Misión y de las demás fundaciones vicencianas, exigiendo recursos económicos estables que garantizaran que los pobres nunca tuvieran que pagar por los servicios pastorales o caritativos. Basándose en la correspondencia, las conferencias, los documentos fundacionales y las Reglas Comunes de san Vicente, el estudio demuestra que el **gratis** no es simplemente un principio económico, sino una expresión teológica de la caridad divina, de la pobreza evangélica y de la libertad misionera. Sigue siendo hoy un desafío profético para toda la Familia Vicenciana.

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When Vincent described the works that he was founding, a one-word refrain rang out – "gratis."[1] The works were to be done free of charge. This stipulation affected his strategy profoundly as he planned new works and opened new houses. He required that they have ongoing sources of revenue (what today we call "foundations" or "a stable fund" or "steady income") which would guarantee their stability in the foreseeable future. This would enable the Congregation of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity, and other groups that he founded to abstain from asking the poor for payment for services.

Elsewhere, I have written about the many sources of revenue on which Vincent's works depended.[2] Others have treated that topic in even more detail.[3] Here, my goal is simply to examine Vincent's requirement that works be done "gratis," a notion much less emphasized today, sometimes almost forgotten, and perhaps even regarded as a "quaint idea" that is hardly realistic in the modern world.

EARLY USES OF "GRATIS"

The contract which Vincent entered into with the de Gondy family for founding the Congregation of the Mission, dated April 17, 1625, stated that the confreres "would go from village to village, at the expense of their common purse, to preach, instruct, and catechize … without accepting for this a remuneration of any kind or manner whatsoever, so as to distribute **freely** the gifts they have freely received from the generous hand of God."[4]

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[1] Vincent's writings in French usually use the word "gratuitement." His Latin texts use "gratis." English translations use other similar phrases, like "free of charge."

[2] Cf. Robert P. Maloney, C.M., *Mystic of Charity* (St. Louis, MO: Society of St. Vincent de Paul, 2019), chapter 8, p. 133-144.

[3] For much greater detail about St. Vincent's fund-raising and his handling of money, cf. John Rybolt, "St. Vincent de Paul and Money," *Vincentian Heritage Journal* 26 (2005) 81-103 and "Vincent de Paul as a fundraiser: his attitudes and practices," which can be found at https://works.bepress.com/john_rybolt/64/ The bibliography on this question is extensive. Cf. Jean Jacquart, "Saint Vincent's Real Estate Policy," *Vincentian Heritage* 7, no. 2 (1986), 181-203, trans. Jacqueline Kilar, D.C.; José María Román, C.M., *St. Vincent de Paul. A Biography*, trans. Sr. Joyce Howard, D.C., (London, 1999), 293-95, chap. XVI, "The struggle to put the company on a more solid financial basis"; his "The Foundations of Saint Vincent de Paul," trans. Stafford Poole, C.M., *Vincentian Heritage*, 9, no. 2 (1988), 134-60. One might also consult *Recueil des Relations contenant ce qui s'est fait pour l'assistance des pauvres. Entre autres ceux de Paris et des environs, ceux des Provinces de Picardie et Champagne, pendant les ans 1650, 1651, 1652, 1653 et 1654* (Paris, 1655). This work offered many details on a famous study of the period of the Fronde: Alphonse Feillet, *La misère au temps de la Fronde et Saint Vincent de Paul,* 4th ed. (Paris, 1868). In addition, for a thorough investigation of the question, cf. Jaime Corera, C.M., "Las bases económicas de la comunidad vicenciana," *Anales de la Congregación de la Misión y de las Hijas de la Caridad*, 85:4 (April, 1977) pp. 462-484, reprinted in his *Diez Estudios Vicencianos* (Santa Marta de Tormes, 1983), pp. 129-157; Jaime Corera, C.M., "Bienes*," Diccionario de la Espiritualidad Vicenciana* (Santa Marta de Tormes, 1995), pp. 43-46; Jean Jacquart, "La politique foncier de Monsieur Vincent," in Vincent de Paul. *Acts du colloque international d'études vincentiennes* (Paris, 1981) (Rome, 1983), pp. 129-143; English version: "Saint Vincent's Real Estate Policy," *Vincentian Heritage* 7, no. 2 (1986), pp. 181-203, trans. Jacqueline Kilar, D.C.; Alejandro Rigazio, C.M., Administration des biens, selon l'esprit de Saint Vincent, trans. Georges Baldacchino*, Bulletin des Lazaristes de France*, 113 (Février, 1988), pp. 21-37; 114 (Avril, 1988), pp. 23-35; Jose Maria Roman, C.M., "Las Fundaciones de San Vicente," *Vincentiana* 27:4-6 (July-December, 1984) pp. 457-486, English: "The Foundations of Saint Vincent de Paul" trans. Stafford Poole, C.M. *Vincentian Heritage*, 9, no. 2 (1988), pp. 134-160; and the dissertation by Rene Wulfman, *Charité publique et Finances Privées*: *Monsieur Vincent. Gestionnaire et Saint*, Villeneuve d'Ascq. Presses Universitaires du Septentrion (1998). Two unpublished studies are also valuable, both found in the Archives of the Congregation of the Mission, Paris, France: Felix Contassot, C.M., "La vie matérielle des Missionnaires" (1959); Bernard Koch, C.M., "Saint Vincent Gestionnaire" (1992).

[4] CCD:XIIIa:214. The French text uses the word: "gratuitement."

On August 1, 1628, when Vincent wrote to Pope Urban VIII seeking his approval for the recently formed Congregation of the Mission, he described the purpose of the new community in these words:

> *Their first and foremost purpose shall be to strive for their own perfection and to devote themselves entirely to the salvation of the country people. They shall go from village to village, preaching, catechizing, and exhorting them to unburden their consciences of the sins of their entire life, hearing general confessions of penitents, instructing children for the worthy reception of their first Holy Communion, and setting up the Confraternity of Charity for the relief of the sick poor,* ***all this free of charge****, receiving no gifts either directly or indirectly*.[5]

In 1631, Vincent wrote forcefully to François du Coudray, who was still negotiating in Rome to get approval for the Congregation. He outlined five conditions that he regarded as essential. The third was that "they (the missionaries) are to **take nothing** from those poor people but live at their own expense."[6]

Urban VIII, when he approved the Congregation officially in 1633, used Vincent's refrain explicitly: "They offer all these services **free of charge** and with no hope of any human recompense, expecting only a divine reward."[7]

Vincent's extant writings and conferences show him returning to this theme on more than twenty-five other occasions, emphasizing it not only to the members of the Congregation of the Mission,[8] but also to the Daughters of Charity, the Confraternities of Charity, the Ladies of Charity, and other groups which he directed. At times, he stated his conviction with great emotion. On October 11, 1647, for example, he admonished Guillaume Delville: "We are no less obliged to give our missions **gratis** than the Capuchins are obliged to live on alms. *O! Good God!* what would people say of a Capuchin who would draw a salary, and what do they not have the right to say of Missionaries who would allow their expenses to be defrayed by certain people during the mission, and to have Monsieur Delville allow this, and in my time! *O Jesus! absit hoc a nobis (far be it from us)!"*[9]

The deceased Fr. Bernard Koch, C.M., whose knowledge of Vincent's life and work was prodigious, summed Vincent's attitude up as follows:

> *Vincent, in addition to his missionary activity, which was* ***entirely free,*** *continued to pursue a growing charitable activity. This meant always finding new resources and working to conserve them, at a time when every source of income was coveted, contested, and the subject of lawsuits, and when, on the other hand, incessant wars endangered the farms as well as the transport companies in which he had invested, and led the king to confiscate the revenues to cover his war expenses. Among the resources*

[5] CCD:I:50. To emphasize the frequent use of "free of charge," I have taken the liberty of highlighting those and similar words in **bold** throughout the article. The Latin text of Vincent's letter to the Pope uses the word "gratis." Readers can find this text in Pierre Coste's French version of Vincent's works: SV:I:55.
[6] CCD:I:113.
[7] CCD:XIIIa:299: *Salvatoris Nostri, Bull of Erection of the Congregation of the Mission* (January 12. 1633).
[8] Cf. a fascinating letter to one of the first missionaries, Jean de la Salle: CCD:I:133.
[9] CCD:III:251.

that Monsieur Vincent had managed to provide to the poor and to the various Congregations for which he was responsible (Lazarists, Visitation, Daughters of Providence, Daughters of the Cross, Daughters of Charity, not to mention some abbeys), he particularly prized farms and agricultural estates. I counted seventeen of them.[10]

WORKS DONE "GRATIS"

The size and cost of some of the works done "free of charge" may surprise modern readers. Here are some striking examples.

1. The Missions

As noted above, the foundational documents of the Congregation of the Mission stated explicitly that the missions were to be given **free of charge**.

Vincent never relented in emphasizing this principle. During a conference that he gave on November 14, 1659, just ten months before his death, he made one of his most eloquent statements on this matter. As he concluded, he told the priests and brothers:

> *It is true that we shouldn't be receiving anything, not even an apple or a grape, but you know the reason, you see it: "Quod gratis accepistis, gratis date (Without cost you have received. Without cost, give)." We've received the grace of God for the instruction and conversion of the people. That has cost us nothing. Let us also be careful* ***not to take anything****. It is our custom to give alms every day, to take nothing for the Masses people ask us to say, and to contribute a little to the collection for the Confraternity of Charity… Now, during the mission, we have to keep at least the spirit of poverty. We make profession of it, and we have to make this obvious in the sobriety and frugality of our food and clothing and have a willingness of spirit to really leave everything, if this were appropriate… I ask the Company to praise God and to thank Him for having placed it in the state of His Son, of the Apostles, and of the first Christians, who practiced poverty so well and who had nothing of their own, but omnia erant illis communia (they had everything in common). So, let's thank Our Lord God for having placed us in this state of the practice of poverty*.[11]

It is easy to forget how costly missions were in those days. The number of missionaries was large. Their stay in a region was lengthy. They needed lodging and food. They brought along heavy equipment and had to pay for transporting it there.

But the missions were to be free! Vincent never wavered in this conviction. In 1658 when, after thirty-three years of "experimentation," he finally published the Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission, he touched on the matter in two separate paragraphs:

> *Our ministry on missions could hardly be carried on if we lived in total poverty, since missions are to be given* ***without charge****. Nevertheless, we should try, in the*

[10] Bernard Koch, C.M. "Une Lettre Inédite de Saint Vincent: Supplique 1645," *Vincentiana*: Vol. 42 (1998): No. 1, Article 19. Available at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentiana/vol42/iss1/19.
[11] CCD:XII:313-314.

Lord, to maintain poverty as an ideal and, as far as we can, in practice as well, especially as regards what is set out here.[12]

St. Paul and his co-workers used to do manual work night and day so as not to impose on the people to whom they were ministering. Following their example, we are not to impose on anyone during our missions, and all our ministry is to be done ***gratuitously****. We do not accept any money as stipend or for food. There is nothing wrong, though, in accepting an offer of furnished lodgings*.[13]

Among the documents collected by Pierre Coste, we find four attestations from the pastors of Pantin, Belleville-sur-Sablon, Romainville, and Livry where they declare that "the Priests of the Congregation of the Mission of the Saint-Lazare House have given missions, **free of charge**, in those parishes in the present year 1659."[14]

While Vincent was firm in this matter, he was not rigid. It is clear in the second paragraph above from the Common Rules that, if it was offered, he sometimes accepted lodging for the priests and brothers giving the mission. He also made a distinction between remuneration and freely-give alms. He wrote to Louis Rivet on January 5, 1659: "We must never accept any remuneration for our missions, either from persons absent or present, rich or poor. I am not saying that you may not accept money as alms if anyone sends you some, but you may not accept it for having given a certain mission or on condition of giving one."[15]

2. Retreats for those about to be ordained priests as well as for priests

The Letters Patent concerning the Union of Saint-Lazare to the Congregation of the Mission (January 1632) state:

Besides the work of the missions, the priests of the Congregation will also be bound to receive in the priory the ordinands of the diocese who will be sent to them by the Archbishop to be formed, instructed, prepared, and rendered competent of receiving worthily the Orders to which they desire to be promoted, and they will even provide room and board for them in the priory for two weeks, ***free of charge***.[16]

Here too, it is important to note how costly the retreats at Saint-Lazare were. Eighty to one hundred clerics participated in the ordination retreats, plus eight to ten priests and eight to ten laypeople. The retreats lasted for eleven days and took place five times a year. All were lodged and fed **free of charge**! Here is what Vincent wrote to Louis d'Estaing, the Bishop of Clermont, on October 18, 1658, explaining how the Congregation was able to finance all this:

Abbé de Chandenier's intention in resigning Saint-Pourçain in our favor – which was confirmed by His Holiness – was to unite this benefice to the Saint-Lazare house to provide it with the means of meeting the heavy expenses it incurs for the ordination retreats held for all the priests in the kingdom. These number from eighty to one hundred at each ordination retreat, which is given five times a year. The ordinands are fed ***gratis*** *for eleven days, as is done for other retreatants, which usually number from eight to ten priests and as many laypeople. They come*

[12] Common Rules, III,2.
[13] Common Rules, XI,7.
[14] CCD:XIIIa:479.
[15] CCD:VII:450.
[16] CCD:XIIIa:282-83.

from all over and succeed one another, so there are always twenty persons here from outside making their retreat, which they also do ***free of charge.***[17]

When King Louis XIII established the Priests of the Mission in Crecy-en-Brie (Seine-et-Marne) in 1641, he gave them a chateau and $800,000 dollars from the sale of the salt of Lagny-sur-Marne to support eight priests and four brothers. The confreres at this house were to give missions in the Diocese of Meaux, provide alms for the needy, conduct **free of charge** one annual retreat for ordinands from the Meaux diocese, and offer two Masses a day: one for the King and Royal Family, the other for the nobility of Crecy. Bishop Dominique Seguier of Meaux approved this foundation on April 12, 1641. Vincent affixed his signature to the approbation.[18]

The retreats that the priests and brothers gave in Rome were similarly costly. On July 11, 1642, Vincent wrote to Bernard Codoing, the superior there:

> *First, concerning the house at $8000 rent,*[19] *I think you did very well, considering the plans for the ordinands. I think you would do well to board the ordinands and retreatants* ***free of charge****; this is the wish of the foundress (The Duchess of Aiguillon). If you can feed them for six dollars a day, that amounts to about $2000 for each ordination and $8000 per year, assuming that you have four ordinations a year and thirty ordinands at each ordination. Moreover, you will be able to use another $4000 for the retreatants at the rate of two per day all through the year. That makes $12,000 for that purpose. Your revenue here amounts to $50,000 at present. I do not know what those $30,000 or $32,000 will be worth in Rome in the future*.[20]

3. Receiving priests into the houses of the Congregation of the Mission

The foundational documents committed the Congregation of the Mission to offering hospitality to rectors of parishes who wanted to make retreats or engage in ongoing education.

> *They receive into the houses of the aforesaid Congregation the Rectors of parish churches who wish to be helped in making their retreats and in governing their churches. Lastly, they do their best to have these Rectors meet once a month, when this can be done conveniently by reason of proximity and without detriment to their responsibilities, to treat cases of conscience and administration of the sacraments. They offer all these services* ***free of charge*** *and with no hope of any human recompense, expecting only a divine reward*.[21]

4. Running seminaries and staffing parishes

Vincent's attitude toward seminaries and parishes was somewhat different. He regarded these as the direct responsibility of the bishops who were asking the Congregation of the Mission for help. Consequently, Vincent expected the bishop to guarantee a permanent source of funding for the seminary or the parish and wanted that funding to include the sustenance of the missionaries who taught or served there.

His letter of August 15, 1659, to Guillaume Desdames, the superior in Warsaw, described how the Queen of Poland was providing a permanent source of support for the

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[17] CCD:VII:314.
[18] CCD:VIII:609.
[19] I have used modern equivalents here for the seventeenth-century currencies used in the original text.
[20] CCD:II:304-305.
[21] CCD:XIIIa:299.

confreres who were staffing Holy Cross Parish there. Vincent added: "Her Majesty's idea seems to be in line with that of Our Lord: to use this benefice for the upkeep of a seminary, where those wishing to be ordained, or to obtain benefices, or who need a retreat to correct some vice or other and make progress in virtue could be received **free of charge** in proportion to the revenue. O Father, how this idea seems to have the marks of an inspiration from God! I hope it will do a great deal of good in Poland, if He is pleased to bless it."[22]

A complicated, but fascinating, document dated April 5, 1658, stated that seminarians in the Diocese of Saint-Malo were to be educated **free of charge**. It then described in detail how the members of the Congregation of the Mission, who were to be responsible for the seminary, would be supported by the diocese.[23]

5. Providing War Relief – The Ladies of Charity and the "Relations"

While the "Relations" were not a *permanent* source for providing help **free of charge** to those affected by the ongoing wars in France, they were a reliable means during a crucial period.

The Ladies of Charity and Vincent discerned that publicizing their relief efforts in regions devastated by war would be a good fund-raising tool. So, they gathered excerpts from the letters they received from those working in the war regions, printed them in leaflet form, and had them distributed in Paris and other large towns. These publications were called the "Relations." Remarkably little has been written about them, though Pierre Coste occasionally alerted readers to portions of letters written to Vincent that appeared in them.[24] A 130-page collection exists in the Bibliothéque Nationale in Paris.[25] The first edition came out in September 1650; the last appeared in December 1655. During those five years, the "Relations" were published monthly for the most part, though with some gaps. Each leaflet ended with a direct appeal for financial assistance, asking that donations be given to certain parish priests or to Ladies of Charity like Madame de Lamoignon and Madame de Herse. As a fund-raising device, the "Relations" were an enormous success.

They contained graphic descriptions of the poverty created by war. For example, readers of the January 1651 edition learned that, in the villages of the deanery of Guise, missionaries had found five hundred sick people and three hundred wounded. They were also attempting to assist more than six hundred people "whose misery was such that, having already eaten the small amount of grain that they had picked up here and there, they threw themselves upon the cadavers of dogs and horses after the wolves had had their fill of them." All the services in the war zones were provided ***gratis***.

6. Daughters of Charity

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[22] CCD:VIII:88-89.
[23] CCD:XIIIa:423-29.
[24] Cf. CCD:IV:94 and 151; V:79-80; VII:348.
[25] Besides this collection, much material from the "Relations" can be found in Alphonse Feillet, *La Misère au Temps de la Fronde et Saint Vincent de Paul*, fourteenth edition abridged and corrected (Paris: Didier et C^{ie}, 1868). Unfortunately, only bits and pieces of the "Relations" have been translated from the original French into other languages. Since historians have known about the "Relations" for centuries, I find it strange that these leaflets have not received more attention. Maynard, Coste, and Román all mention them, but they offer few details about their content, perhaps because the leaflets do not focus on St. Vincent himself. Cf. Abbé Maynard, *Saint Vincent de Paul* (Paris: Ambroise Bray, 1860) IV, 143f.; Pierre Coste, *The Life and Labours of Saint Vincent de Paul*, translated by Joseph Leonard (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1935) II, 403f.; José-María Román, *St. Vincent de Paul, a Biography*, translated by Joyce Howard, D.C. (London: Fox Communications, 1999) 572. More details can be found in Alexandre Féron, *La Vie et les Œuvres de Charles MAIGNART de BERNIÈRES* (Rouen, 1930).

The Daughters too were also committed to providing most of their services free of charge. In May 1641, Louise de Marillac wrote to the Rector of Notre-Dame de Paris, asking for permission to take charge of the instruction of poor girls in the Saint-Denis district. She stated: "Should you agree, for the glory of God, Monsieur, to give the above-mentioned suppliant the permission required in such cases, thereby allowing the poor the liberty of sending their children **free of charge** to schools where they would be unhindered by the rich, who do not want those who teach their children to accept and keep poor children so freely, these souls, redeemed by the blood of the Son of God, would be obliged to pray for you, Monsieur, in time and in eternity."[26] Permission was granted.

Of course, many of the Daughters' works were inevitably "free of charge," since they were directed toward foundlings, small children, and destitute adults.

In 1638, Vincent and Louise took up the work of the foundlings. Initially, the children stayed with Louise and the sisters. Then Vincent rented a house for them on the rue des Boulangers.[27] The number of children "found" grew quickly. One can imagine all the problems involved in lodging, staffing, and financing this work. Vincent was quite inventive in that regard. In fact, one of his most creative arrangements for housing the foundlings illustrates what a shrewd businessperson he was.

When Louis XIII died in 1643, a provision in his will permitted Queen Anne of Austria to assign a million dollars to Vincent as a stable endowment for his Congregation's missions in Sedan. Vincent chose to use the money to build what came to be called the "13 Houses."[28] They were adjacent to the sisters' motherhouse. He rented those houses to the Ladies of Charity to use for lodging the foundlings. The regular rent became the stable endowment to support the missions in Sedan. Readers will notice how Vincent got two for one on the deal! The money from the king's bequest allowed him to build the houses for the Ladies of Charity to lodge the foundlings (whom the Daughters of Charity then cared for), and the rent money from the Ladies of Charity supported the missions in Sedan.

Apparently, abuses crept in among the sisters, as had happened among the confreres. Here are the remarkable words that Vincent spoke during a Council Meeting of the Daughters of Charity on June 11, 1654:

> *I say then, Sisters, that you must avoid this sin and never take for yourselves anything from the money of the poor or from what is in your savings because it doesn't belong to you. When the devil wants to make someone fall into sin, he begins with little things. Today he'll make you keep back a penny, tomorrow a dime, and in this way the evil keeps growing. Judas began by covetousness. He went so far as to sell his Master. See where the love of money led an Apostle of Our Lord! And if this Apostle, who had received so many graces, worked miracles, and lived so many years in the company of Our Lord, fell in this way, do we not have reason to fear this sin?*[29]

At another meeting, he underlined the same point:

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[26] *Spiritual Writings*, p. 50. Cf. http://via.library.depaul.edu/ldm/11

[27] In 1647, the Ladies of Charity acquired the Château de Bicêtre, where weaned babies were taken. Then, in 1651, all recognized that Bicêtre was harmful to the children's health, so they returned to Paris and were housed at the far end of the Saint-Denis suburb. In 1670, they were in two houses, one opposite Notre-Dame and the other in the Saint-Antoine suburb.

[28] Vincent's initiative in 1643 was the inspiration for the title of the present-day Vincentian Family's "13 Houses" project, which (at the time of this writing) has rapidly spread to more than eighty countries.

[29] CCD:XIIIb:313.

A certain very pious, charitable person who, through humility, did not wish to be named, has learned from experience and often considered all the benefits God in His goodness is bestowing through these poor Sisters, and the blessings God gives to their work, which consists in the spiritual and corporal relief not only of the sick poor, but also of convicts condemned to the galleys, while they are detained in Paris, and even of little foundlings, whom the Sisters have been raising for several years, as well as some poor little girls whom they are teaching, ***free of charge****.*[30]

TEN REFLECTIONS ON DOING WORKS OF THE CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION GRATIS TODAY[31]

1. Of course, enormous socio-economic changes have taken place between Vincent's time and ours. For that reason, the Congregation of the Mission's "Instruction on Stability, Chastity, Poverty, and Obedience,"[32] published in 1996, introduces each vow or virtue with a series of paragraphs describing the present situation and how that affects our interpretation of the vow or virtue in our present context. Today, for example, many government-financed programs exist whose goal is to alleviate poverty. These usually pay salaries to administrators and other workers. Public and private hospitals and schools also pay salaries. Vincent would surely not have refused these. Rather, they would have served to build up the "funds" or "stable sources of income" which he demanded before accepting works.
2. The current Constitutions and Statutes of the Congregation of the Mission say nothing about offering missions, retreats, and other works free of charge. This is surprising, since this theme was so important to St. Vincent.
3. However, an often-forgotten document, the "Interpretation of the Fundamental Statute on Poverty,"[33] approved by the General Assembly of 1980 (the same assembly that composed the current Constitutions), stated: "In order to understand better the spirit of the Fundamental Statute, it will be useful to consider other principles of Vincentian poverty, for example: … h) that the Community has ownership of goods so that we can perform our ministries **gratis**, where necessary, and give alms to the poor (CR III,2; CCD:XII:307-314)." The conference to which the Interpretation of the Fundamental Statute refers is that of November 14, 1659, cited earlier in this article.
4. The "Instruction on Stability, Chastity, Poverty, and Obedience in the Congregation of the Mission" treated the Fundamental Statute on Poverty in detail and listed several practical applications for today. But doing works "free of charge" goes unmentioned.

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[30] CCD:XIIIb:120-121.

[31] While this topic is not frequently treated today, it is by no means completely forgotten. Cf. Getúlio Mota Grossi, C.M., *Un Místico de la Misión, Vicente de Paúl* (Madrid: Editorial LA MILAGROSA, 2016), 119-164.

[32] *Vincentiana* 40 (January-February 1996), the entire issue.

[33] The Fundamental Statute, affirmed by Pope Alexander VII on August 12, 1659, in *Alias Nos* is brief but not easy to understand today (hence, the need for an "interpretation" by the 1974 General Assembly). It reads as follows: "All and everyone received into our Congregation, having pronounced the four vows, who possess immovable goods or simple benefices or will possess them in the future, though they retain dominion of all of them, shall not have free use of them; therefore, they may neither retain the fruits of such goods or benefices, nor turn them to their own use, without the permission of the Superior, but are held to dispense these fruits in pious works, with the permission and according to the judgment of the Superior. If, however, they have parents or relatives in need, the Superior shall see to it in the Lord that their needs are relieved from these fruits before all else." Cf. CCD:XIIIa:481-82.

I should say *mea culpa* for that omission since I was the Superior General when that document was written.

5. Is offering works **gratis** unthinkable today? Surely not. In fact, there are innumerable works which the Congregation of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity, and other branches of the Vincentian Family still provide "**free of charge** and with no hope of any human recompense, expecting only a divine reward,"[34] as Urban VIII put it almost four centuries ago. A few examples will suffice. Readers will readily think of others:
    - Most of the services provided in the Congregation's missions *ad gentes* are offered free of charge. In recent years, the Congregation has opened many new missions and, following Vincent's practice, has sought stable sources for funding them.
    - Within the Provinces of the Congregation, many direct services to the poor are provided free of charge, like the provision of food, clothing, and shelter to those in need.
    - Many of the services of the Daughters of Charity, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, AIC, and other branches of the Vincentian Family throughout the world are completely free of charge.
    - Project DREAM, a remarkably successful HIV/AIDS program in which the Daughters of Charity have been collaborating with the Community of Sant'Egidio since 2005 in six sub-Saharan African countries, is completely **gratis**.
6. Still, one might legitimately ask: could more of the Congregation's works be offered "free of charge"? As in Vincent's time, this would demand that, before beginning a work, we seek stable sources for funding it. In recent years, the Superior General and his Council have been energetically seeking to set up stable patrimony funds to assist economically disadvantaged provinces in their works among the poor. The Superior General has also been asking for the aid of economically advantaged provinces to meet the cost of beginning new missions.
7. On the deepest level, Vincent's teaching about offering our works **gratis** underlines the importance of corporate and individual poverty, which Vincent regarded as essential to the health, even the survival, of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity. There are few topics about which Vincent spoke more forcefully. From his rhetoric, it is evident that there were abuses in his time, as in ours.
8. As many have pointed out, serious abuses against the vow or virtue of poverty are often ignored, or tolerated, or treated benignly in comparison with the way in which abuses against chastity are treated. In an era in which we have experienced a sexual abuse scandal, zero-tolerance rules regarding some sexual abuses have become widespread and are strictly enforced. But notable abuses against the vow of poverty, some of which involve very large sums of money, at times arouse little or no response.

[34] CCD:XIIIa:299: *Salvatoris Nostri, Bull of Erection of the Congregation of the Mission* (January 12, 1633).

9. Vincent emphasized corporate poverty. In the Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission, he wrote: "We must all realize that it (poverty) is the unbreachable rampart by which the Congregation, with the help of God's grace, will be defended."[35] He explained:

> *It is poverty that must maintain us. What will become of the Company if attachment to worldly goods infiltrates it? What will become of it? The saints tell us that poverty is the crux of religious orders. We're not religious. It was expedient for us not to be. We're unworthy of being religious, even though we live in Community. But we can say that poverty is the crux of communities and especially of ours, which has greater need of it than others. It's this bond that frees it from all earthly things and attaches it to its God. O Savior, give us this virtue, which attaches us inseparably to your service, so that we may neither want nor seek anything but you alone and your glory!*[36]

10. He also stressed individual poverty. He told the confreres: "You ought to know, sirs, that this virtue of poverty is the foundation of this Congregation of the Mission."[37] On another occasion, he used even more forceful language: "Woe, woe, yes, woe to the Missioner who wants to be attached to the perishable goods of this life! He'll be snagged by them. He'll remain pricked by those thorns and caught in those bonds... Then we can say goodbye to all the works of the Mission and to the Mission itself, for it will no longer exist. All we need to do is read the history books, and we'll find countless examples that will make us see that wealth and the abundance of worldly goods have caused the loss not only of many of the clergy but also of entire Communities and religious Orders because they weren't faithful to their primitive spirit of poverty."[38]

It is remarkable how drastic Vincent's warnings were when addressing failures regarding poverty: *Au revoir* to the Congregation of the Mission if we become attached to material goods! On the bottom line, for Vincent, material goods are not "ours." Rather, "we live on the patrimony of Jesus Christ, on the sweat of the poor."[39]

Gratis became a refrain in Vincent's life. Offering our services to the poor *gratis* was one of his key tools for demonstrating our solidarity with the poor.

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[35] CR III, 1.
[36] CCD:XI:209.
[37] CCD:XI:71.
[38] CCD:XI:71-72.
[39] CCD:XI:190.

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