

COLLOQUE

Journal of the Irish Province of the
Congregation of the Mission

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Editorial

This issue of COLLOQUE is somewhat different from usual because the Editor was present at the 38th General Assembly. It includes the talk by the outgoing Superior General which opened the Assembly and that by the incoming one which closed it. In between are three of the talks which were given to the Assembly.

It is also the third successive issue to carry an obituary of a Vincentian lay brother, but this time it is that of the last surviving brother in Ireland and Britain.

The Opening of the General Assembly, 29 June 1992

Richard McCullen

A few weeks ago I had occasion to accompany some friends of mine visiting Rome who wanted to see the excavations that have, over a period of forty years or so, been carried out in the area under the high altar in St Peter's basilica. The guide who accompanied us explained quite simply at the beginning of the tour that what we would see would be the remains of a Roman cemetery that lay along the side of the Vatican hill in the first century A.D. After St Peter's death by crucifixion his body would seem to have been taken up the hill to the section of the cemetery where poor people were buried. There was no elaborate mausoleum for this poor Judean immigrant. There, in the poor people's plot, they placed St Peter's remains in a grave, carefully marking the spot with an improvised shelter that would keep the soil from being washed away down the sloping hillside. Something a little more elaborate would be constructed later, while some two hundred and fifty years later again the Emperor Constantine would build a basilica that would stand until the present imposing building would be erected between the 16th and 18th centuries.

What is illuminatingly clear is that the poor man's grave of the year 67 A.D., where Peter's remains rested, was the centre around which everything subsequently was built. Clear evidence, too, has been found that Christians of early times wished to be buried close to Peter's grave with their bodies facing into that hallowed spot where Simon Peter's bones await the final resurrection.

Picking one's steps along the pavement of that underground ancient cemetery and, conscious of the magnificence of Michaelangelo's dome that now crowns the grave of the pauper and immigrant Simon Peter, the sense of continuity and contrast jostled for place in my mind. Continuity: here we are in touch with the Peter who heard the voice of the eternal God saying to him: "You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church" (Mt 16:18). Continuity, too, with all the successors of Peter down to Pope John Paul II. Contrast: the simplic-

ity of life around the Lake of Galilee with, at times, its unpredictable storms, the crowds looking for free food, the open air preaching on the hill of the Beatitudes. Contrast that with the illuminated splendour of the present day basilica on the occasion of a solemn papal function, with the voices of the Sistine choir soaring into the 150 metre dome above the main altar.

The contrast can be, and indeed is, lifegiving. The Church, built on the Rock of Peter, must meet and dialogue with the succession of humanity's changing generations and with its diversity of cultures. But to be lifegiving the Church must frequently remind itself of its continuity with Simon Peter and with the simplicity and poverty of him who gave Simon Peter the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven.

In what could be described as a sort of domestic Church within the larger Church the Congregation will, during this Assembly, give thought both to continuity and to contrast. Our reflections and discussions must have as their reference point the very simple beginnings of our Congregation and especially that charter of vows and virtues which St Vincent gave it and which are but the quintessence of the Beatitudes of our Lord. Contrast: The Congregation, like the Church, must face into a rapidly changing society and be ready to change, not matters of principle but its methods of proclaiming the good news of Christ to the poor. The world of the 1990s contrasts markedly with that of 17th century France and indeed even with the world of the 1950s. The emphasis on the new in the central theme of this Assembly makes that point clear: New Evangelization, New Men, New Communities.

I would venture to say that St Peter could speak eloquently and from personal experience on the theme of this Assembly. New Evangelization: he learned, even if slowly, the meaning and, above all, the challenge of proclaiming what he himself on a memorable occasion called "the words of eternal life" (Jn 6:68). With the other apostles on that occasion he must have realised that for all the beauty and attractiveness of the good news which the Master was preaching it was still, and would always be, "a hard saying". Any programme, then, of New Evangelization without its "hard saying" must be suspect.

New Men: St Peter knew what it was to become a new man. The process of becoming a new man was a painful one for him. He had to pass through the humiliating experience of knowing that he denied our Lord when challenged by the words of a simple girl. He had to pass through, too, at a later time the embarrassment of being found out and challenged by St Paul, as a man who had not the courage of his

convictions. Through the fire and water of purification Peter became a new man.

Becoming a new man is the fundamental challenge that we at this Assembly, and with us the entire Congregation, must meet. Without striving honestly to become new men there will be a hollow ring about everything that we may say, however impassioned, about the urgency of new evangelization and of new communities. Becoming new men is the challenge of personal holiness. And, as the extraordinary Synod of 1985 reminded us, "The Church today is badly in need of Saints". Throughout this month we must continually be inspired by the scriptural motto, chosen for this 38th General Assembly: "Be transformed by the renewing of your minds" (Rm 12:2).

New Communities: In his mature years St Peter had much to say about the demands and dynamics of Christian community living. "Let all of you", he wrote, "have unity of spirit, sympathy, love of the brethren, a tender heart and a humble mind" (1 P 3:8). The pages of our Constitutions contain a marvellous blueprint for community living, in order that our evangelization of the poor may be more effectively realised. The reality, however, as we know, is often markedly different. St Peter's recipe for community living has not lost anything of its relevance for us in the Congregation at the present time, and it finds a clear echo in the eighth chapter of our Common Rules.

It is not stretching the imagination too much, I think, to say that those words of St Peter about unity of spirit, a tender heart and a humble mind, may well have been among the sentiments of those few Christians who in 67 A.D. took his body from Nero's Circus and carried it up the Vatican hill to lay it in a poor man's grave where it still rests, awaiting the return of the Master, when there will be a new heavens and a new earth.

Evangelizare Pauperibus

Luigi Mezzadri

(The author is a member of the Rome Province, stationed in the Collegio Alberoni, Piacenza, where he lectures in Church History. The talk was given on 2 July, in Italian)

Laying out the Vincentian project

A “project” (from the Latin *proicere* “to throw something ahead”, so as to gather it up later) usually means: 1. An analysis of the situation; 2. An appeal from some perceived need; 3. A lively imagination which responds by focusing on reasons, criteria and practical methods.

Vincent de Paul was convinced that he had received, from God, a project for involving the Church and society of his own time in the service of the poor.

Situation analysis

The 17th century is characterised by extreme poverty. It has been calculated that of the population of France 4% to 8% were below the minimum level for survival; 20% were very close to subsistence level, so that only a slight change in the price of grain would force all these to beg; 60% were forced to beg in years of poor harvest, of which there were many in that century. The poor, therefore, made up 88% of the population. But this is only in calculations that are based on food. There are, of course, other forms of poverty.

The State was responsible for this, yet stayed aloof from it. It waged war, but did not bother about the victims of the war. It did nothing about the fluctuations in the price of grain nor did it do anything about the consequences of these changes. It did nothing for health or education.

There was, though, a rather odd situation. The monarchy distanced

itself from the people while gathering the nobility around itself. The new palaces, especially Versailles, were the symbol of this choice.

The idea of poverty was emptied of its spiritual dimension. It was no longer seen as a privileged situation, modelled on that of Christ, but as something negative. A poor person was evil, blameworthy, libertine, ne'erdoowell, stinking. For these reasons he was to be locked up as a lawbreaker (*La grande reclusion*). In this way the State "created" the poor person and condemned him ("Ideological segregation").

The Church also shared responsibility for this state of affairs, but it, too, stayed aloof. It was a big landowner but was an "absentee landlord". Cf No 21 of St Vincent's conferences:

One day St Vincent told his community the story of the conversion of a heretic, whom he himself had brought to the true faith. Before submitting, the Huguenot asked the saint to solve a problem for him: "Father, you told me that the Church of Rome is guided by the Holy Spirit, but that's something I can't believe because, on the one hand, we see the Catholics in country areas at the mercy of vicious and ignorant pastors, uninstructed in their duties, with most of them not even knowing what the Christian religion is. Then, on the other hand, we see the towns full of priests and monks who do nothing; in Paris there are, perhaps, ten thousand, yet they leave the poor people in country areas in this appalling ignorance in which they will be lost. And you would try to persuade me that this is being guided by the Holy Spirit! That I will never believe (XI 34).

The Church accepted the ideology of *La grande reclusion*. What did it do? Few bothered with the poor. Their activity tended in other directions:

Mystical escapism into self centred consolation;

Triumphalistic integralism; (wasn't the party of the *devots* for Catholic politics in Europe? Didn't it yearn for the impossible, for the State to embark on a political policy in Europe to allow it to create a Christian environment?).

Restoration, i.e. getting back to "the way things used to be". There were many movements for restoring the primitive observance in rules. Jansenism was, basically, one of these movements, a return to the primitive Church.

St Vincent

Vincent felt himself to be directly and personally challenged. Therefore he *saw*, he *judged* and he *acted*.

He saw. "I have seen them, these poor people, treated like animals" (X 125).

He judged: Before arriving at this stage he had to bring about a triple rebellion. He rebelled against the mystical escapism. His starting point was never a vision. Other saints did this. There was a vision to justify St Ignatius' decision; for St Vincent there was a call. The founder of the Jesuits could not resist when Christ spoke; our founder could not say "no" when the poor called. He rebelled against the triumphalistic integralism, against a society which was revealed as a sinful structure because it made people poor and marginalised them. He rebelled against the restoration mentality because he did not want to reestablish old medieval recipes, to return to old rules, to out-of-date procedures. That is why he did not want us to be members of a religious order; he wanted apostles.

The saint's criterion for making a judgement then, omitting any "mystical element from a vision", was twofold. The voice of the gospel spoken "for me", and the voice of the poor spoken "to me". We see how he quoted and used the text from Luke, 4:18-19:

The spirit of the Lord has been given to me,
for he has anointed me.
He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor,
to proclaim liberty to captives
and to the blind new sight,
to set the downtrodden free,
to proclaim the Lord's year of favour.

This means a new way of looking at Christ: His coat of arms, therefore, is not the sleeping Infant Jesus nor the Crucified, but the Evangelizer of the poor. Every time St Vincent thinks of the poor as the image of Christ he is doing something subversive. For him it is not enough to see them as his brothers because of philanthropic links; these could lessen. He puts all the force of religious tension at their service. If a poor person cries out, and this poor person is the Son of God, then a bit of weeping is simply not an acceptable response. "The poor who do not know where to go or what to do, who are already suffering and increasing every day, they are my burden and my pain" (Collet, I 479).

He had a new way of looking at the Church. It was not a framework for Christianity (*Ecclesia id est Papa*), nor just something visible (Bellarmine) and hierarchical (Pseudo-Dionysius), but the *Ecclesia caritas* “given by God for the service of the poor”. It was a new way of being community, not a place of observance, but a community for mission, which comes about through “conference” (*conferre*: to carry together), through apostolic spirituality. (St Ignatius used to say: *in actione contemplativus*, Boff: *in liberatione contemplativus*). The apostolate is not something added on; it is of the essence. “It is not enough for me to love God if my neighbour does not love him”. The spiritual life of the mission is, then, modelled not just on fidelity to Christ but also to mankind and to history.

He acted: The putting into practice of his plan for evangelization was not geared towards pacifying the poor with the opium of religion. The real attempt to switch off the cry of the poor had been made by those who thought of them as “evil”. St Vincent launched a plan to fight poverty, to free the poor from being in need. To do this he reawakened consciences, entered into solidarity with the poor, wanted missionaries of “the new times” who would evangelize in a new way by showing the link between charity and gospel.

The central core of his plan was the evangelization of the poor. St Vincent got away from the perspective of “the state of perfection”, from the different degrees of holiness. This was the perspective of the “three kinds” from the Middle Ages: at the top were monks, then the priests, and finally, well below, layfolk. In St Vincent’s perspective holiness did not mean getting away from the world, but rather the spirituality of the streets, going everywhere, the apostolic life.

The apostolic life is the best..., not excluding contemplation but including it and mastering it so as to know in a better way the eternal truths which it has to proclaim; and, besides, it’s of more use to the neighbour whom we have the duty to love as ourselves and therefore to help in a way that hermits cannot do (III 346 ff).

Evangelization takes place through proclamation

Scripture says: “The time has come and the kingdom of God is close at hand” (Mk 1:14-15).

St Vincent says:

What's said, then, is that we should seek God's kingdom. We should *seek*. "Seek" is only a single word but it seems to me to say several things. It means that what energises us is that we aim always at what is recommended, working nonstop for the kingdom of God and not giving up like cowards, paying attention to our relationship with God and taking proper care of it, though not in any self-satisfied way that draws attention to ourselves. *Seek*. "Seek" implies care, implies activity (XII 131).

So, Fathers, that's a long explanation of this point from the gospel; however, it's not the whole of it. We have to realise that by these words: "Seek first the kingdom of God and his justice" our Lord is asking more of us than merely seeking the kingdom of God along the lines we've just been explaining. What I mean is, it's not enough for us to live in such a way that God reigns in us, seeking his kingdom and his justice in that way. No, on top of this we must want the kingdom of God extended and established everywhere, and we must make this happen so that God may reign in all souls, that there may be only one true religion on earth, that the world may live differently from the way it does now, through the strength and power of God, and by the means available through his Church. Or, briefly, that his justice be so well sought and imitated, by everyone living a holy life, that God may be glorified perfectly in time and eternity. That's what we have to do; we've got to want God to be glorified everywhere, and to work for this (XII 137).

Evangelization takes place through bringing people together.

Scripture says: "He sent his servants to call those invited to the wedding" (Mt 22:3). St Vincent says:

But, Father, we're not the only ones who instruct the poor; surely that's just what Parish Priests do? What about preachers in both town and country? Don't they do this in Advent and Lent? They preach to the poor and preach better than we do.

That's true, but there is no Company in the Church which has the poor as its own share and which is devoted entirely to

the poor and does not preach in the major towns; that is what missionaries undertake; that is their speciality, to be devoted to the poor as Jesus Christ was. Our vocation, then, is a continuation of his, or at least relates to his in its own particular circumstances. Oh, what happiness, but also what an obligation we have to love it. One of the main motives for this, then, is the importance of the work: to make God known to the poor, to proclaim Jesus Christ to them, to tell them that the kingdom of God is close at hand and that it is for the poor. Oh, how marvellous that is! It's beyond our comprehension that we should be called to be coworkers with the Son of God and sharers in his plans. What! To make ourselves – I wouldn't dare say it it's so great, – it's such important work, evangelizing the poor that it is, *par excellence*, the Son of God's own work and we are called to be the instruments by which the Son of God continues to carry on from heaven the work he did on earth (XII 81).

Evangelization takes place by attraction

Scripture says: "Day by day the Lord added to their community those destined to be saved" (Ac 2:47). "In those days ten men of nations of every language will take a Jew by the sleeve and say: 'We want to go with you, since we have learnt that God is with you'" (Zc 8:23). In St Vincent's conference the Huguenot says:

Now I see that the Holy Spirit guides the Roman Church because the instruction and salvation of the poor village people are being looked after (XI 36).

Evangelization takes place through "radiation"

Scripture says: "Always behave honourably among pagans so that they can see your good works for themselves and, when the day of reckoning comes, give thanks to God" (1 P 2:12). The comparison with yeast in bread may also be brought in here (Mt 13:33).

St Vincent says, on the successful conclusion of a mission:

But what should lead us all the more to bless God and thank him is that they are perfectly reconciled with their Parish Priest and live now in great peace and unity, both sides being very pleased

with this and also very thankful for it; for ten or twelve are here to thank us in the name of the whole parish (XI 6).

Evangelization takes place through people being freed

Scripture: See the Good Samaritan in Lk 10. St Vincent says:

“When we help them we are acting from justice, not mercy” (VII 98). He wrote to one of his missionaries, Guillaume Cornaire, as follows: “I am in complete agreement with your determination to continue administering the sacraments to the sick... but you will be doing far more if you do not, because of the prohibition, stop visiting the sick. You are accustomed to seeing them every day, consoling them in their afflictions and encouraging them to patience; keep on doing this, please” (IV 84). Again, Vincent, in dealing with objections from some missionaries who queried whether it was their job to work towards freeing people from poverty in various forms, reworded the question in this way:

But what’s the point, someone will ask me, of taking on a hospital?... Why go to border areas to give alms, risking a lot of danger and being away from our work?

Here’s how he answered:

Priests devoting themselves to the care of the poor, wasn’t that what our Lord and many great saints did? They did not just recommend the poor to others, but they themselves consoled, comforted and healed them. Aren’t the poor the suffering members of our Lord? Aren’t they our brothers? And if priests neglect them who do you expect to help them? So, if there are any amongst us who think that they joined the Congregation to evangelise the poor but not to comfort them, to take care of their spiritual needs but not their material ones, I’m telling them that we have to help the poor, and get help for them, in every possible way, through ourselves and through others... By doing this we are evangelising by word and by work, and that’s the best way, and also the way our Lord did it and the way that those who represent him on earth by duty and character, such as priests, should also do it. I’ve heard it said that almsgiving is what helps bishops to become saints (XII 87).

On an earlier occasion he had said:

In this vocation we are strongly assimilated to our Lord, Jesus Christ who, it appears, on coming into the world made it his prime concern to help the poor and to take care of them. *Misit me evangelizare pauperibus*. And if one were to ask our Lord: “What did you come on earth to do?” – “help the poor” – “Anything else?” – “help the poor”, etc. Now in his own group he had only poor people and he did not go into towns very much, mixing almost all the time with village people and teaching them. Aren’t we, then, very happy to be in the Congregation for the same reason that led God to become man? And if one were to question a missionary wouldn’t it be a great honour for him to be able to say with our Lord: “*Misit me evangelizare pauperibus?* I’m here to catechise, instruct, help the poor and hear their confessions”. (XII108).

Reflection on the Vincentian project

Vincent, then, wanted to project something on into the future so that we would be goaded on to catch up with it. Reflection should begin with a prayer, so that God might enlighten and guide us. We could reflect on the following sort of questions:

1. Do you not have the impression that at a certain moment we also went through a process of physical separation, especially when from Alméras onwards we became involved in royal parishes? We became chaplains in the parishes of St Louis and Notre Dame in Versailles, in the chapel of the château of Fontainebleau, in St Cyr, Les Invalides, St Cloud. Altogether more than a hundred confreres were engaged in this work. How did we lose out on hospitals, overlook the missions?

2. What is the attitude of our community in the face of the injustices of our time? Is it, then, ideological segregation from the world of the poor? Do we neutralise their cry or do we interpret it as a call to us from God?

3. Does the society in which we live hide the face of God from the poor? What are we doing to transform this unjust society? Are our works a credible sign to the poor?

4. The first purpose of the Congregation is to have a genuine com-

mitment to grow in holiness. How do we interpret this: in the sense that we claim the presence of exceptional individuals: those who fast, healers, stigmatists, visionaries, or rather a group seen as *sign-persons*?

Is the holiness required that of a community which becomes a vital sign, the location of the anticipated grace of the Kingdom? It is possible to see the promptings of salvation history, according to which the community should continually reflect the fidelity and marvellous works of God for us, as a crash-therapy against the temptation of the Church to become secular (Metz). Is our prayer, then, to enclose ourselves in the shell of “intimacy” or to make ourselves, like the prophets, voices with God and “cry out to him” for the poor?

5. Write out a prayer today in St Vincent’s style. How would you pray? Would you invoke the patience of the poor, their Christian resignation? Try to communicate this in your groups.

Sharing views on the Vincentian project

There are only two questions:

1. What is evangelization? Does it also include working for justice and the dimension of service?
2. How are we to make our communities and our works become a sign to the poor?

New Communities

James Claffey

(The author is a member of the Eastern Province of the United States, stationed in Brentwood, New York, engaged in vocations ministry. The talk was given on 8 July, in English)

A pastor in a country parish heard that one of his parishioners was going about announcing that he would no longer attend church services. His rebellious parishioner was advancing the familiar argument that he could communicate just as easily with God out in the fields with the natural setting as his place of worship. One winter evening the pastor called on this reluctant member of his flock for a friendly visit. The two men sat before the fire making small talk, but studiously avoiding the issue of church attendance. After some time the pastor took the tongs from the rack next to the fireplace and pulled a single coal from the fire. He placed the glowing ember on the hearth. The two men watched as the coal quickly ceased burning and turned an ashen grey, while the other coals in the fire continued to burn brightly. The pastor remained silent. The parishioner said: "I'll be at services next Sunday".

My brothers, we are stronger in community. By evangelizing the poor together we more easily discover Christ present in the experience. By contemplating that Christ together our resolve is richer and deeper to be about the mission for the whole of our lives and with the best of our energies.

We are called to community. St Vincent brought confreres together, as we state in Constitution 19, that "living in a new form of community life, they may undertake the evangelization of the poor". "Community life has been a special characteristic of the Congregation and its usual way of living from its very beginning" (const. 21). Good community life offers a vital sign of hope and witness to society; good community also provides an atmosphere and an opportunity for the growth and maturity of its members.

In some places our community life burns dimly. There is more grey

coal than bright ember. Instead of being energised by the communal life some confreres feel trapped, stagnated, even consumed by its flame. The ember attempting to burn on its own exists in every Province. “Burn out”, an increasingly common phenomenon among religious, is not only an individual problem, it is often a symptom of weakness in community life and structure.

Interestingly, neither liberals nor conservatives seem to be successful today in rekindling this fire. The latter try to manufacture some sense of order in a situation they perceive as chaotic, dreaming the impossible dream of going back to the good old days. Liberals, on the other hand, seem to offer survival more than revival. The tendency here is to survive through a great diversity made possible by the vaguest of visions, holding themselves together by an agreement, stated or not, to do the minimum together. Content with few meetings, few times of prayer and an occasional party to sustain a sense of belonging, they frown on attempts to do more as unrealistic. A “sense of belonging”, however, is not committed community. The problem is not that members are dropping out, but that they are merely dropping in. The Jesuit theologian Bernard Lonergan offers a useful framework, suggesting that genuine community grows out of the commonality of experience, understanding, judgement and action.

Common experience

More than a basic knowledge of Vincent and our Congregational heritage, we need to immerse ourselves in reflection on common ideas and a common approach to mission. It is my conviction, however, that for a Vincentian there can be no substitute for direct experience of the poor. This is the foundational experience that should be common to us all.

Common understanding

This basically refers to meaning the same things when we use the same words. Language establishes the categories with which we interpret our experience. We need therefore to develop some consistency about the categories and concepts we use. This is essential if we are truly to understand each other and talk to each other without misrepresenting views or suspecting motives.

Common judgement

A community needs to agree on certain ideas that are basic to our task and common to our lives. Our life together must be participative if our decision-making is to be co-responsible. Basic common judgements will lead us to personal judgements in tune with the values and directions of our Constitutions; the involvement of all the confreres in the decision-making process will foster ownership of the judgements by everyone.

Common action

In this step the commonality that has gone before is now enfolded programmatically. At this stage members can cooperate in solidarity with each other in effective realisation of the mission. The global Constitution and Statute, the Provincial Mission Statement, the local Community Plan, all will be actively owned and acted upon by all. A community thus empowered will be much more than the mere sum of its parts.

This way of looking at community is not particularly new to any of us. As a matter of fact I present it only in order to set a context. Our problem is not at all with the theory of community; our limitation is one of practice.

I would affirm that our confreres are good men who have come to serve and who believe in community. Most confreres basically agree with the vision of community outlined in the Constitutions. The values themselves are not in question. We do, however, have two pressing needs.

In his book *Community and Growth* Jean Vanier says: "My own fear is that some communities stifle their members because they do not know how to modify their structures to enable the essential of the community to be better lived". First of all we need to accept the evolution of community structures.

Secondly, we follow a saint who proclaimed that "love is inventive even to infinity" and yet at times we lack the creativity to engender new life and significance by expressing time-proven values in engaging and energising forms. We need enabling structures. We need creativity.

For this task certain virtues are needed, ones in short supply. Some values have been drilled into us throughout our life in community: humility, trust, obedience. Virtues characteristic of our heritage, they are things we like to see in our candidates. They are strengths of

character that function like corporate virtues holding things together, indispensable for group projects.

In themselves, however, they are incapable of moving us in any outward direction. For that, a different set of virtues is needed: initiative, challenge, truthfulness, responsibility. Without these, an enormous passivity is bred in our souls. Together these virtues counteract passivity. They activate and energize openness to providence and God's spirit. People with these virtues are not always popular and are not always right but, unafraid to make mistakes and learn from them, they are a blessing to a community. They are the "refounders" who bring about enabling structures. If we expect our men to be stallions at work, we should not expect them to be geldings at home. That metamorphosis, that temporary neutering, is not possible.

I would like to present eight concrete ideas for your consideration. These are not finished products. They are meant to be starting points for discussion; they will undoubtedly be enriched by the wealth of experience represented here. I realise that for some Provinces one or other idea may not be at all helpful and that for other Provinces the whole list may be insufficient. I believe, however, that they are worth considering as possible directions for communal renewal.

At the last General Assembly the Superior General asked us, in reference to the men who have left us: did we offer them the opportunity to work with the poor as members of a truly prayerful community? These are my first two areas.

To know the poor

This is the foundational experience for the Vincentian. It is so much the heart of our Congregation that there is actually little to be said here. Following Vincent, we best come to know Christ as he did: in the experience of evangelizing the poor. To be truly Vincentian this is the core experience we must possess. Some will struggle with the "how to" enter into direct contact with the poor; because of assignment or position, some will tithe a percentage of their time to work with the poor. But all Vincentians should know some poor people by name. Perhaps we need to initiate a policy ensuring that our newly ordained priest confreres and our newly professed brother confreres receive as a first assignment an apostolate of direct contact with the poor.

Prayer

It has been said that the only person who prays well is the one who prays often. We need to be in prayer, together, regularly, and spend time at it, because time is the essential element in contemplation, that long loving look at what really is. We need to deepen and sharpen our prayer life, our awareness of how God moves among us. We need to discover again and again that God, who is our future, indeed moves before us and calls us, in spite of our weakness and brokenness, to build the Kingdom. If we seek engaging revitalization in our prayer life, we must be about more than merely the breviary.

One Vincentian parish has found a meaningful rhythm of prayer in the following way. On Monday mornings, to launch the work-week, they gather with the household staff for a modified Office prayer of two psalms, a reading and intercessory prayer. On three other days the confreres gather to follow the same basic format, while the fifth day is dedicated to personal time among the confreres: how each is doing personally and ministerially at this time. Song and the Sunday Gospel set the context; one of Vincent's prayers from the booklet *Praying in the Spirit of St Vincent* is prayed slowly and perhaps commented on freely. This practice is regular and involves sacrifice at times but the confreres find themselves faithful to it.

At this same local community all their parish groups begin every meeting with an extended prayer time involving commentary on the Sunday Gospel and faith-sharing. This practice has now become the normal expectation of the parish.

For their evening prayer the confreres have replaced the breviary with an extended prayer practice at the table, a sung grace, maxims of St Vincent and St Louise, the *Expectatio Israel*, without hurry. Concerned that their prayer above all be engaging, they report that this lived experience, for them, resonates well with our Constitutional mandate to "celebrate morning and evening prayer together".

Simple lifestyle

It is striking that a return to a simple lifestyle along with a greater emphasis on prayer are the common elements in all the great renewal movements among religious communities. Herein lies a great challenge for us: in a world where scandalous wealth and privilege exist alongside human hunger and injustice, the Congregation of Vincent de Paul can symbolize concretely that the "abundant life" God offers

is possible, perhaps *only* possible, when we live free of the illusory pursuit of finding meaning through endless acquisition and consumption. We are not called to Franciscan poverty but to a simple lifestyle. This demands of us a sustained effort at personal and Congregational credibility. "Poor people are privileged recipients of the Gospel. . . they will be able to believe in the Gospel we proclaim if, following Jesus, we ourselves take the road of poverty, if we share our goods with them, if we are one with them and if we strive for their liberation. It is in putting at their service our communities and our commitments, our houses and our goods, that we are credible to them". Where we live determines what we see and hear and often ultimately *how* we live. The clarion call to solidarity with the poor loses some of its clarity when the bugle calls from the best house in town.

Faith sharing

An intriguing thought: ecclesialogically, we foster the establishment of CEBs, small base communities, built on a concept of coming together family-style to share faith experiences and convictions, and yet within the community we often do so little to foster meaningful dialogue of the same nature. In the western world therapy threatens to replace spirituality. We now have specific therapy procedures called Twelve Step Programs, for alcohol, nicotine, drug and eating disorders, as well as relational and personal difficulties of all kinds. Why are these programs often so successful? Partly because they foster sharing: honest, regular, personal sharing in a supportive atmosphere, which people need to grow.

The *Lines of Action* from our last General Assembly stated unequivocally that "mutual communication is the indispensable means for creating authentic communities" (19). We are not speaking merely of a number of confreres in the same room at the same time sharing the same prayer. We are not even speaking of discussions about the abstract value of faith or prayer in our lives. We are speaking of efforts to share familiarly, as brothers or, as Vincent would say, "as good friends who love each other well", about our faith experiences and convictions, successes and failures, hopes and fears.

Confreres are seeking opportunities to share about Vincentian life and spirituality. Faith-sharing invites confreres to do so in a non-threatening atmosphere of prayer and reflection. Energy and optimism may begin to emerge. The collective sharing of individual experience

may also generate a map for discovering how life within community can best be renewed with participative ownership by all.

A community is generative when the tension is dynamic between individual experience and established structure. The resulting confidence experienced by participants affirms each one and empowers them all to reclaim our foundational values and replant them in newer concrete practices. In the best scenario, legitimate differences are welcomed and transformed into the communal strength that is the gift of diversity. Faith-sharing also demands listening closely to each other. This requires effort. Good listeners are rare: we have been taught so much more about speaking than about listening. Yet listening to an other, showing interest in what he does, is perhaps the most challenging area in community life today. Listening has a strange and magnetic force. In the presence of someone who truly listens we unfold and expand. Listening is life giving. Unfortunately the opposite is also true.

Concretely, then, whether about our Constitutions or our ministerial experience, renewed communities will be those that reflect and pray together the convictions and experiences shared by men attempting to be brothers.

Ongoing formation

Since the last General Assembly much has been written and spoken about ongoing formation. It rightly has been hailed as one of the means at our disposition to renew ourselves and our mission, personally and corporately, in fidelity to Christ, evangelizer of the poor, along the way of Vincent de Paul. Ongoing formation has been termed one of the contemporary requirements of conversion and holiness.

In the context of our consideration today, ongoing formation is a key responsibility we have for each other. If we are to continue to grow as persons, as Christians, as Vincentian evangelizers, we will probably do so more fully together. In our communities we must help and encourage one another, because we are responsible to one another and because personal renewal will have its impact on the whole community, as we become communities of new men for the mission.

Concretely, as stipulated for example by my own Province, each confrere is to develop an annual proposal for his engagement in ongoing education and formation, building a system of accountability. The time is more than ripe for enflashing the theory of ongoing formation by making it more of a priority in our lives.

Spiritual animators

Our most vital experience of the Congregation occurs at the local level. Constitution 129 reminds us that “The Congregation forms itself particularly in the individual local community”. In this context the superior, always called to be the centre of unity, has now been asked to be the “spiritual animator” of his community. Have we placed this burden on his shoulders without helping him to develop the skills demanded for spiritual animation? At times we have even made unity the highest and often unquestioned value; the reconciliation of all differences, the highest virtue of leadership. We do not live for ourselves or for our own unity but for the mission, and in any case no one could adequately respond to that unrealistic goal.

On the practical level, there is need for creative workshops, with professional input, to prepare confreres to be spiritual animators. Our Province holds an annual superiors’ meeting. Instead of the customary routine of business reports and presentations the last experience was a life-giving one, a twoday dialogue with facilitators about some of the skills required for healthy animation of local community today.

The normative authority of our superiors is not in question here; their interpersonal authority, however, may suffer a crisis of credibility unless they are trained for the leadership role. Again, how much room there is for creativity in responding to this need.

Local community plans

Mandated by Constitution 27, local community plans are a concrete means of community renewal. They can express the values we seek together in the concrete ways our lived situation will allow. House plans articulate what we will do and they also commit us to do it together.

House plans need to expand and capture the newer forms of community life emerging today. House plans can be a means of expressing our mutual respect for the legitimacy of diverse lifestyles, for example, to live in a more or a less institutionalized setting, with more or less services provided by support staff, with this or that covenanted agreement. Many today, especially in the First World, do not want to live where they work. Some separation of work place and living space is experienced as psychologically healthier. Others wish to take on many of the household tasks often provided by salaried employees.

My own Province is facing a struggle on this issue today. Younger

men wish to leave the more institutional setting of our big houses for varying types of small community living. They feel strongly that they urgently need to do so. Our older men meanwhile feel the earth shaking under them as the rooms empty out. Alternative lifestyle: for some, new life; for others, a threat. Herein lies a great challenge for many Provinces.

All of this can be done within the parameters of our tradition and Constitution. For us, community is *for* the mission; enhancement of the mission should make many things possible in terms of community reorganization. Surely in the future, groups of confreres will reform themselves around a specific apostolate project, others around a certain lifestyle, others by a commitment to a particular form of spirituality.

House plans, sincerely articulated and lived, can move us beyond mere functionality, because as long as we live only on a functional level we will remain more productive than prophetic in our service.

Co-membership

It seems that throughout history men and women have identified with Vincentian values without vows or membership. In so many of our apostolates throughout the world there are many people who are Vincentians with a small “v”, enlivened by Vincent’s vision and actively engaged in en fleshing our saint’s values. They accompany us closely as brothers and sisters in our mission; many are former seminarians who still closely identify with our spirit.

At the same time, one of the more positive and life-giving developments for religious communities today is the Service Corps, the volunteer association, the co-member. Let us see this as a great blessing and even as we recommit ourselves to the empowerment of the laity we might seek ways more fully to respect their contribution to our mission, to view them as peers, and to include them productively in our community processes. I am not speaking of affiliate membership but of a deeper co-membership, which is coming in the Church. Let us prepare adequately in our Congregation for this development.

My brothers, the question facing us is not what does the future hold, but Who holds the future? We will discover that God is our future by walking the path of new evangelization as new men in new communities. The Lord Jesus will be New Wine for the Congregation if we truly seek to offer him new wineskins. The path before us is marred

by obstacles, difficulties and limitations, but it is in our weakness that the Lord will be strong in us. Let us beg together for a greater share in Vincent's energy and creativity that our community life for the mission rekindle a fire of witness to the newness of life in the gospel.

A Constitution-based discussion guide

To know the poor: 1, 10, 11, 18.

Prayer: 41,42, 44, 45.

Simple lifestyle: 12:3, 31, 33, 34, 35.

Faith-sharing: 8, 12:4, 20, 22, 37, 46.

Ongoing formation: 2, 12:6.

Spiritual animators: 19, 129, 154.

Local community plans: 24, 25, 27.

Co-membership: 1:3,44.

A Pagan's Faith

Francis Banolo

(The author is a member of the Madagascar Province who is studying in Paris. The talk was given on 21 July, in French)

Felix culpa

I was baptised at the age of thirteen at a time when none of my relations were yet Christian. Later on most of my brothers and sisters also were baptised, and when I became a priest I was able to baptise my mother and two of my aunts. My Dad still practises the traditional religion, being blocked from baptism because of his three wives, whom he had before the coming of the Christian missionaries.

I became a Christian thanks to a mistaken way of looking at things. In our region it used to be thought that to be educated meant automatically to be Christian. Each tradition had its religion. Those who stayed on in the village continued with the traditional religion, those who went off to be educated (to Europeanise themselves) had also to adopt the religion of the Europeans.

I learned the catechism for six months. After my baptism I was all fire and flame and I used to follow the missionary around through the bush as he went everywhere preaching the gospel, preaching it even to those who were not educated. And when the said missionary suggested to me that I should become a priest I saw this as the logical sequel to my baptism. So, five months after my baptism I entered the pre-seminary after a long discussion with my parents who couldn't come to terms with the life of a celibate priest which did not pass on life inherited from the ancestors.

At the end of one of my years of study I believed that I came to the understanding that to be a priest was not enough; I had to go further by becoming a member of a religious community. But because the Vincentians were the only such group in our region there was no choice open to me. That's how I became a Vincentian. And I don't regret it.

New evangelization

As time went on I became aware that right from my accepting the Christian faith there was a misunderstanding. In going for education I thought that I was moving into another culture, the European one, and so abandoning my own. In other words, I thought that to become Christian it was necessary to break away from one's cultural roots. And I was not the only one who thought this way.

I am now convinced of the necessity of rethinking my beginnings in faith. What does God want me to do? He called me where I was. And what language did he use to make me understand that he really had called me? If I go back quickly over certain aspects of the story of my vocation, I can only be amazed. How can I explain that the last traditional priest in my clan was my greatgrandfather, and that from this village came the first priest of the Christian covenant in this clan? How can I explain that the day of my ordination coincided, according to the traditional calendar, with a day specially designated for the enthronement of a traditional priest? And how can I explain to this tribal society the *raison d'être* of a Christian priest? Quite simply, on the day of my ordination I took as my starting point a local myth about a child sacrificed for the good of his family. So, from the material point of view the priest does not bring anything like wealth or descendants to his family, but only God's blessing. And that is worth far more than gold or silver. What value has wealth in the hands of one accursed?

Of course this is only one individual case. It's my personal story. But I can draw certain conclusions. And anyway Abraham's was certainly a unique case but afterwards it could be applied to others who followed God's call. The first point which emerges is that God has not despised my people who were living in a culture which was unaware of Christianity. So, if God is for us who is against us? Even if the point from which I started was a misunderstanding of the Christian faith God knew how to bring good results from this. I don't, of course, claim that through my own culture I have already reached perfection and that I have no more searching to do. Above all it is a matter of responding to a call of love. We can love only with the heart which we have. This is the basis, the foundation, of this encounter with God incarnate. He meets us at the place where we are. And when our heart is awakened to his call he offers us his gratuitous gift. "If you only knew what God is offering" (Jn 4:10). By embracing the Christian faith I don't wish to renounce my own culture, but I become open to accepting in addition the immense richness of the faith brought by Christ.

In order to bring to reality this aspiration, which I'm always aware of, my searching focuses on inculturation. How can I authentically live my faith without renouncing my culture, not slipping into a type of "disincarnated" religion foreign to my own background? This is a challenge for a missionary, and for the evangelization of my fellow-countrymen. Not, of course, that I have already succeeded, but I am convinced of its necessity. And my searching goes on, with hope.

The Closing of the General Assembly, 25 July 1992

Robert Maloney

Jesus came not to be served, but to serve. And he serves by giving his life. Jesus reminds his apostles of this repeatedly. “Let those who would be first among you be the least of all and the servant of all” (Mt 10:43). On the night before he dies he washes his apostles’ feet, and he says to them: “Do you understand what I have done? You call me Lord and Master. And that is so. But I have given you an example, that as I have done, so also you may do” (Jn 13:13-15).

St Vincent understood this gospel truth very well. He tells us that the poor are our lords and masters, and that we are their servants. In a sense, like Jesus, he saw the world upside down. He used to tell his followers: “In the Kingdom of God many things are the opposite from the way they appear in everyday life. The ranks are different, the rewards are different. In the Reign of God, everything is reversed: the real kings and queens are the poor men and poor women to whom you carry food and clothing.”. “How excited people are”, he would say to them, “when they see the king or, even more, when they visit him. And we have that opportunity everyday when we meet the poor!”. My brothers, St Vincent saw things as they really are. He knew what the Kingdom of God is really like. He knew that on the deepest level of things the poor are at the centre, and we approach God when we approach them. They are the masters, we are the servants.

As we end this 38th General Assembly may I encourage you to be faithful servants. Let me suggest two means for doing that:

1. As leaders in your Provinces be sure that the service of the confreres is *competent*. If they need to learn a language to serve the poor, let them learn it well. If they need to learn the use of a computer to do their work, let them learn it well. If they need to relearn theology or liturgy or preaching, let them relearn them well. Do not hesitate to give confreres time off for ongoing formation. It is worth the price. A few months spent learning, retooling, imbibing new thoughts, or a new spirit, can produce years of labour by revitalised men. A seed sown

now can produce a mighty oak tree later. Let the renewed formation of our confreres be a high priority. Help them to be competent.

2. Be sure that your own service is *creative*. I encourage you to reflect on our central values in that light: our service, our common life, our prayer:

Try to find effective ways of serving the most abandoned in your countries. Some of the old ways are surely valid, but search out new ways, too, with courage.

Try to find ways of creating joy, brotherhood and communication in our houses. Some of the old ways are surely valid, but search out new ways, too, with courage.

Try to find ways of making prayer something beautiful for God and attractive to those who join us. Let young people who come to our houses say: "The Vincentians really know how to pray".

Enough, my brothers. Today we celebrate the mystery of faith that is the source of renewal. We eat Jesus' flesh, we drink his blood. And we accept his word calling us to be servants of our lords and masters, the poor. Let our service be competent and creative. If it is, the spirit of St Vincent will live on in us and the Congregation of the Mission will grow.

Some reflections on translating St Vincent's conferences into English.

Thomas Davitt

During the 1940s the late Mgr Ronald Knox translated the Latin Vulgate bible into English. When he had finished he published a book *On Englishing the Bible* (Burns Gates, London 1949) which, incidentally, is dedicated to an Australian confrere Ronald Cox. This book consists of eight talks and articles written during the time he was working on the translation, including a talk given on Radio Eireann.

The whole book, which is now quite rare, is very interesting, especially for anyone who has tried his hand at translating. From the talk entitled "Thoughts on Bible Translation" I have picked out three ideas which seem to me to be very relevant for anyone translating Vincent's French into English, and I have added a fourth from his final talk "Farewell to Machabees":

1. [What is needed is a translation] for the benefit of a person who wants to be able to read the word of God for ten minutes on end without laying it aside in sheer boredom or bewilderment (p. 3).

2. [Hilaire Belloc said in a lecture:] The business of a translator is...: "What would an Englishman have said to express this?" (p. 4).

3. [Any translator will tell you] that the bother is not finding the equivalent for this or that word, it is finding out how to turn the sentence (p. 4).

4. What matters is that the Bible should speak to Englishmen not only in English words, but in English idiom. Any translation is a good one in proportion as you can forget, while reading it, that it is a translation at all (p. 94).

On 21 February 1659 Vincent gave a conference on "Seek the Kingdom of God" (XII 130 ff). An English version of this is contained in the selection of conferences and letters published by Browne &

Nolan, Dublin, in 1881. These were translated by Malachy O'Callaghan and John Burke, though their names do not appear on the title page. On pages 56 and 57, the second and third pages of this conference, we find the following three sentences:

Our Lord, therefore, having recommended this to us we should attach ourselves thereunto.

O, miserable man! thou hast so many obligations to be interior, and yet thou art in this state of falls and relapses!

Let us not remain in a state of languor and dissipation, in a worldly and profane state, which causes souls to be employed about the objects which the senses present, without considering the Creator who has formed them.

If a reader in the 1990s meets these three examples of translation in the first three pages of the conference it would not be surprising if he reacts by doing what Knox refers to: "laying it aside in sheer boredom or bewilderment". Vincent was not a boring speaker, nor are the written versions of his talks boring, and what he said was not bewildering. Perhaps that sort of language was acceptable in 1881, but I do not think that any reader today would find it acceptable to have to read fifteen pages of such unattractive phraseology.

From the 1920s onwards Joseph Leonard translated all the conferences, though his collected translations were not printed until much later (Philadelphia, 1963). Instead of newly translating the conference referred to he merely made some slight alterations to the 1881 translation, (including the elimination of an inexplicable "not" in the opening sentence), and the three quotations given above remained unaltered.

No speaker or writer today would use an expression like: "we should attach ourselves thereunto". I would alter the principle which Knox borrowed from Belloc, quoted above, to: "How would an Irish confrere of the 1990s express in English what Vincent said in French?". I think that an English version of one of Vincent's conferences should be in the sort of language which an Irish confrere would use in a conference on the same subject today. This is the practical application of the fourth quotation from Knox given above. And it is important to remember that Vincent's words were spoken, not written; a printed translation, therefore, should read like a spoken talk, not like a written article.

In the recent past I have heard confreres express the idea contained

in: “we should attach ourselves thereunto” in three different ways: “we should make it our own”; “we should buy into it”; “we should take it on board”. Each of these three is an authentic contemporary expression of this idea, perhaps somewhat colloquial but certainly not slang. And we have to remember that Vincent used a contemporary colloquial idiom and not stilted language; in fact he explicitly forbade confreres to use such language. The second and third quotations also seem stilted and archaic to today’s readers. The use of the pronoun “thou”, in the second quotation, is also unacceptable today.

The words: “let us attach ourselves thereunto” are a translation of: “nous devons nous y attacher”. One school of thought would say that “translation” means a strict switching of each word of the French into its English equivalent, and that anything beyond that is “paraphrase”. According to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* one of the meanings of “paraphrase” is: “expression of its sense in other words”; it is difficult to see what is unacceptable in that, especially when conversion from one language to another is involved. If the Irish sentence: “Tá leabhar agam” is translated by converting each word to its English equivalent we get: “There is/book/at me”; but that is not English. To express the same idea in English we have to say: “I have a book”, and that includes inserting the indefinite article “a” which does not exist in Irish. No one, though, will howl “paraphrase” at this, so it is difficult to see why they do so when the same technique is used in translating Vincent’s French into English. Knox puts it well: “I have urged that the translator’s business is to recondition, as often as not, whole sentences, so as to allow for the characteristic emphasis of his own language” (p. 9). “Recondition” seems to me an excellent word.

In one section of his first talk: “Thoughts on Bible Translation” Knox deals with what he calls “consecrated phrases” which “we are told, we must not alter in any way” (p. 8). Further down the same page he says: “But it is, I submit, a grave error to stick to a form of words, in itself unnatural English, merely because a thousand repetitions have familiarized the public ear with it”. Any translator of Vincent’s conferences comes up against this problem. Three examples occur to me, with which confreres of my generation at least will be familiar: “Gentlemen and my very dear Brothers” (with or without the “very” and/or “dear”), “a scholar of the fourth form” and “wretch that I am”. These are certainly, in Knox’s words, “consecrated phrases”. Like himself I do not accept that therefore they must not be altered. The principles quoted at the start of this article should be applied here.

“Gentlemen and my dear Brothers” is the O’Callaghan Burke translation of Vincent’s “Messieurs et mes chers frères”. This, incidentally, is of much less frequent occurrence that might be imagined. Vincent’s most frequent form of address, at the start and all through a conference, was simply: “Messieurs”, with: “mes frères” also very frequent. “Messieurs et mes chers frères” was used by Vincent because the group to whom he was speaking consisted of priests (the “messieurs”) and seminarists, students and lay brothers (all of whom were addressed as “freres”). “Gentlemen” would not be used today in addressing such a group, and probably the distinction between priests and brothers would not be highlighted except for some specific reason. I think, therefore, that unless the distinction needs to be highlighted Vincent’s “Messieurs et mes chers frères” should be translated as: “My dear confreres”, since that is probably what would be said in our context today by a confrere addressing such a group.

“A scholar of the fourth form” cannot be retained in a present-day translation, for two reasons: “scholar” would not be used in Ireland today to describe a boy in second level education, and “fourth form” is not, in my experience, the usual expression in use. There might even be another problem here. In France today the lowest year in a second level school is called “Sixth” and pupils advance year by year up to “first”. If that system was used in Vincent’s day then the word “quatrième” would have to be translated as “third”! Finally, this expression is not, in fact, another example of Vincent’s belittling of himself; in the context in which it appears it is clearly an example of tongue-in-cheek irony.

“Wretch that I am” translates: “Misérable que je suis”. It presents a different sort of problem because such an expression would not be used at all by today’s confreres during a conference. So what is a translator to do? Translate it or omit it? But Vincent *did* use it, so it has to be retained, and must not be toned down. Next, what about the word “wretch”? Keep it because it is part of a consecrated phrase or find a new word? Harrap’s *New Standard French and English Dictionary* gives “wretch, scoundrel” for the noun and “wretched, miserable, worthless” for the adjective. “Wretch” and “wretched” are not archaic or obsolete words and are still in current use. Given the choice available it seems preferable to retain “wretch” and “wretched” in most cases.

Following the fourth principle quoted above from Knox the translated conference should read like a talk given in the 1990s by an Irish

confrere. That, of course, refers only to the language. If some ideas are from the 17th century they have to stay. This raises the problem of technical vocabulary from that time. Some legal terminology, for example, has to be retained because there is no modern exact equivalent. With regard to theological vocabulary there may or may not be a modern equivalent for the same idea. Vincent very often talks about aiming at “perfection”. He uses the word in the meaning it has in Benet of Canfield’s book *The Rule of Perfection*, namely tending towards that for which we were created, eternal relationship with God. In the not too distant past the expressions “the spiritual life” and “the interior life” were the usual ways of expressing this idea, but they seem to be less used nowadays. Perhaps “relationship with God” is an acceptable contemporary equivalent.

A problem arises for the translator, if he has not been using the English word “perfection”, when Vincent makes a link between the French word and “Estate ergo vos perfect!, sicut et Pater vester cael-estis perfectus est” (Mt 5:48). Seven English translations of Matthew which I looked up, including Knox’s two versions, use the word “perfect”. *The New English Bible*, though, has: “There must be no limit to your goodness, as your heavenly Father’s goodness knows no bounds”, so a translator of Vincent may feel free to jettison the “consecrated phrase” if he chooses to.

That last clause “if he chooses to” is fundamental. The translator makes choices. His choices will never please all his readers. Some of them do not always completely satisfy himself either, especially when he returns to look at them some years later.

So now I offer, as the next item in this issue, my translation of one of his conferences.

Seek the Kingdom of God

Vincent de Paul

(Translation of a talk given to the community in St Lazare on 21 February 1659, some weeks before his 78th birthday).

My dear confreres, I feel well enough to speak to you this evening, so we'll continue with the explanation of the second chapter of our rules (1). The last conference, our first on this chapter, dealt in a general way with what the gospels teach. Our congregation tries to make a special point of living up to this. It's what God teaches, aimed mainly at people who want to deepen their relationship with him, good people, people chosen by him to be, as our Lord put it, the light of the world and to reach heaven. We said something about this last Friday and it would only bore you to go on about it again, except to say in passing that what is taught in the gospels applies to ourselves in a special way because it is our way of reaching the goal we set ourselves, deepening our relationship with God, to say nothing of the personal obligation we accepted of living according to it when we took it as our own special rule.

So, let's move on now to the second paragraph where the rule says, quoting Jesus Christ: "Seek first the kingdom of God and his justice, and all these things which you need will be given to you as well". Our Lord, then, has recommended this to us, so we should make it our own. He wants it, it's a rule of the Congregation, it's he himself who says it, and it's up to us to pay attention to what he's saying and to give ourselves to his Majesty in order to put it into practice. It might be no harm to spell out word by word what has just been read, or at least the start and the main points.

What's said, then, is that we should seek God's kingdom. We should *seek*. "Seek" is only a single word but it seems to me to say several things. It means that what energises us is that we aim always at what is recommended, working nonstop for the kingdom of God and not giving up like cowards, paying attention to our relationship with God and taking proper care of it, though not in any self-satisfied way that draws attention to ourselves. *Seek*: "seek" implies care, implies

activity. Seek God within yourself, for St Augustine admits that when he looked for him outside himself he failed to find him. Seek him in your soul, for that is where he wants to be. That is the foundation on which his servants build the virtues which they are trying to put into practice. This is essential; it must be our aim; if we fail here we fail in everything. And those who have failed should be worried about it, ask God's forgiveness, and do something about it. If there's one person in the world who needs this it's the wretch speaking to you; I fail, I fail again; I fail often in recollection and rarely recover it; I pile up fault on fault with the wretched life I lead and the bad example I give.

[Then, pulling himself together, Fr Vincent continued]

Poor man, you've plenty of reason to lead a spiritual life and you keep on falling, and falling again! God forgive me!

We should seek to develop this, to allow Jesus Christ to reign in us; we should seek this and not be lazy, not fritter away our lives like worldly, materialistic men who react to things merely at surface level and don't bother about the Creator who made them, who never pray to be freed from false values, never seek the supreme value. So, Fathers, let's seek this. But what exactly is it? The glory of God and the reign of Jesus Christ.

After the word "seek" comes the word "first"; that means we seek the kingdom of God above all else. "But, Father", you'll say, "there's so much to be done, so many jobs around the house, so many things to do in town, down the country, so much work. Are we to skip all that just to think about God?" No, but these things must blend into our relationship with God by seeking him in them, and by doing them in order to find him in them, rather than just wanting to get them done. Our Lord wants us, above all else, to seek his glory, his kingdom, his justice; and to achieve this he wants us to give priority to our relationship with him, to faith, hope, love, to spiritual exercises, to prayer, to recognising our faults and accepting humiliations, to work and problems, and all this under the eyes of our supreme Lord. He wants us never to slacken off in serving him and praying to him to subdue kingdoms to his goodness, to win graces for his Church and virtues for the Congregation. If we can once lay this solid foundation for ourselves, aiming at the glory of God, then we can be certain that the rest will follow.

We have our Lord's promise that he will see to all our needs, so that we don't have to worry. We must, of course, make provision for

everyday affairs and keep an eye on them in the way God expects, but not make them the main thing in our lives. God expects us to do this, and the Congregation will do well to see to it; but if it makes the mistake of going for appearances, for things that don't last, neglecting the spiritual and the things of God, then it will no longer be the Congregation of the Mission; it will be a body without a soul, and St Lazare here will once again be what it used to be, a place of scandal to good people, a place where people are turned off God. But what exactly is this kingdom of God?

Various explanations have been given. First, it means God's reign over what he created, angels and human beings, the living and the lifeless, the devils and the damned; he is master, lord, sovereign, over everyone and everything.

Second, it means the organization of the Church, including both the chosen and the fallen away; God is its king. He has given laws to his Church. The persons in charge carry out their work successfully because of his help. He guides the councils and assemblies which are held for the benefit of Christianity, and the Holy Spirit presides at them. It is he who has given the insights which saints all over the world have experienced, defeating the wicked, clearing up doubts, clarifying the truth, pointing out mistakes and showing both the Church as a whole and the individual Christian the right paths along which they can travel in safety.

Third, he reigns in a special way over good people who honour him and serve him, good souls who give themselves to God, who think only of God, chosen people who will give him glory for ever. He reigns over such people in a special way as they put into practice the virtues which are God's gifts; he's the God of virtues and there aren't any which don't come from him (2). They all have their origin in this inexhaustible source; he gives them to chosen people, persons who are always receptive, always responsive, incorporating them into their lives. That's how they possess the kingdom of God, that's how God reigns in them.

Now, Fathers, does that description fit us? Do we experience this happiness of God reigning in us without any resistance on our part? Let's ask ourselves: "Do I do what such people do? Am I responsive to his promptings, obedient to his will, conscientious about my spiritual exercises and always ready to carry out what he wants?" If that's so, then have no fear of saying with our Lord: "I, who am sent by the living Father, myself draw life from the Father" (Jn 6:57). Appreciate

the fact that God, who has given the virtues as gifts, has chosen you to put them into practice in your lives, that you draw life from the Father, and that he reigns in you.

But if such is not the case, then what's to be done? We must give ourselves to him without delay, nothing held back, at this very moment, so that he will be pleased to draw us to this life of his chosen ones, to strip us of so much self-will and self-centredness which prevent God from taking undisturbed and total possession of us. What's to prevent us all, here and now, making a joint declaration of surrender to his divine goodness? So, let's say to him: "King of our hearts and souls, here we are humbly prostrate at your feet, surrendering completely to you in obedience and love. Once more we dedicate ourselves, totally and for ever, to the glory of your Majesty. We beg you with all our hearts to bring about your reign in the Congregation and to give it the grace of putting its management into your hands, with no one deviating from this, so that all of us are guided by the way our Lord and your followers lived".

So, Fathers, that's how we are to take the words: "Seek first the kingdom of God". But there's another little bit: "and his justice". I know there are some who see practically no difference between seeking the kingdom of God and seeking his justice, and so there would be no need to delay in explaining these words. However, others see a distinction and, since there's not a single word in the sacred scriptures which isn't helpful if it's well explained and reflected on, it's worth while telling you what the words mean.

"Seek the justice of God". To do this we first have to know what this justice of God is. You, Fathers, have studied theology while I'm completely unqualified, like a boy down in fourth year. You know there are two types of justice, commutative and distributive, and both are found in God: *Justus Dominus et justitias dilexit* (Ps 10:8). It's found also in human beings, but with this difference; in them it's dependent, in God supreme. The two types of justice in us, though, have certain points of resemblance to, and links with, the divine justice on which they depend. God's justice is, therefore, both commutative and distributive at the same time.

It is commutative because God converts people's work into virtue and their merits into rewards, and when the body corrupts, the soul takes possession of the glory it merited. This change of merit into reward is done by degree and quantity according to what theologians call arithmetic proportion. Yes, God grants virtues in proportion to

the effort made to acquire them, and glory is graded according to the quantity and value of good acts. That, Fathers, should make us sit up and take notice! God is going to pay us in line with justice, an account based on our work. Let's get down to work, then; let's get down to work at virtue, at the double. We've got to seek the honour and good pleasure of our good and sovereign saviour; we've to become spiritual, strengthening God's reign in us. There's a phrase in St Paul to the Corinthians: *Opera illorum sequuntur illos* (3), the good works of a just man will follow him, and God will reward him for them, just as he'll punish the wicked, in proportion to their deeds, in the fire of hell. But he'll do it accurately, with that arithmetic proportion we've been talking about. We should cut down on the deficiencies of our soul and step up virtue; God will be exact in rewarding us for good deeds and punishing us for bad ones. That's true; I was reading about it again recently.

But justice is also called distributive in so far as it has a certain proportion called geometric, as when God gives heaven to the good and hell to the wicked, people like myself; I can't expect anything except severe punishment. Heaven is a blending of measureless joys which God gives to good people. What's hell, then? A place full of all sorts of afflictions which never end, set aside for those who prostituted themselves to sin. This justice is called distributive; why? Because heaven is the wages, or salary, which God pays to his servants, and hell is the punishment to which he sentences the wicked. God has the right to deal with each one according to his behaviour. Let's not fool ourselves, Fathers; we'll be punished; that should scare us.

I was reading the other day, or perhaps someone told me, that a member of a religious order said that God seemed to be feared in that order, that fear was characteristic of it but not of everyone in it, since he excepted certain persons who hardly ever think of God's punishments and in whom the fear of God is non-existent, characters who have gone adrift, losing sight of their ultimate purpose and losing interest in it. "As for myself", he said, "I make my prayer, say the office and do all my spiritual exercises, fearful of doing them badly, or at least not really well enough". Let's have a look at how we do ours; we'll find lots of reasons for being worried; instead of deserving reward for them we'll be found by God to deserve punishment.

But what's the point of all this stuff about commutative and distributive justice? It's this, in one word: to get us to understand that in order to seek and, we hope, to find, this divine justice we must see it

as both commutative and distributive at the same time. In other words, we have to see it as ready to reward us amply if we try to merit it by putting into practice the virtues suitable for our community. That, in a certain sense, is imitating divine justice.

So, Fathers, that's a long explanation of this point from the gospel; however, it's not the whole of it. We have to realise that by these words: "Seek first the kingdom of God and his justice" our Lord is asking more of us than merely seeking the kingdom of God along the lines we've just been explaining. What I mean is, it's not enough for us to live in such a way that God reigns in us, seeking his kingdom and his justice in that way. No, on top of this we must want the kingdom of God extended and established everywhere, and we must make this happen so that God may reign in all souls, that there may be only one true religion on earth, that the world may live differently from the way it does now, through the strength and power of God, and by the means available through his Church. Or, briefly, that his justice be so well sought and imitated, by everyone living a holy life, that God may be glorified perfectly in time and eternity. That's what we have to do; we've got to want God to be glorified everywhere, and to work for this.

I've been using "his glory" and "his kingdom" interchangeably because they're the same thing; his glory is in heaven and his kingdom is in people. So, we should always want his kingdom extended and want to put all our resources into this, so that after establishing his kingdom on earth we go on to enjoy it in heaven. We should have this lamp always lit in our hearts.

Isn't it great, Fathers, that we are in a community which aims not only at preparing ourselves for God to reign in us but also at getting him loved and served by all the world, saving the whole world?

When we read the rule we see that it recommends us in the first place to have a genuine commitment to grow in holiness, which means letting God reign in you and me, and in the second place to work with him for the spread of his kingdom. That's aiming high, isn't it? That's like the angels, whose job it is to reveal God's will to people so that they can carry it out. Is there any life on earth preferable to ours?

That, Fathers, is a crude attempt to explain the words: "Seek first the kingdom of God and his justice". Let's move on now to our motives for dedicating ourselves to God for this. The first is not just that the rule says so, but that Jesus Christ orders us to. It's the first of his recommendations, the most important thing he did, wanting people

to know, love and serve God, wanting his kingdom and his justice sought above all else. Now if our Lord urges us to this, and orders it, he also gives the grace to do it, to those who ask for it, and keeps on giving more to those who work with him. What would be the point in not cooperating in something so holy, so profitable and rewarding to our vocation? With God's help nothing will stop my giving myself totally to something so worthwhile.

A second motive is our Lord's promise. And what's that? If we work for him he'll work with us. We should seek his glory, busy ourselves about that and not bother about anything else *et haec omnia adjicientur vobis* and all those other things you need will be given to you as well. So, we should work at allowing God to reign in us and in others by means of all the virtues, and as for all other day-to-day affairs let's leave them in his hands; that's what he wants. Yes, he'll see to it that we're provided with food, clothing and even learning. We're in trouble if we haven't this last; missionaries are in trouble if they don't study to acquire it. But first of all we have to work at the virtues, work at our relationship with God, prefer spiritual things to others, and the rest will come our way.

And, in this connection, remember Abraham. God promised to populate the whole world through the only son he had, and then ordered him to offer this son to him in sacrifice. If Abraham had his son killed how could God fulfill his promise? Abraham, though, by this time was used to carrying out God's will and set about obeying this order and not worrying about anything else. "It's up to God to worry about it", he could say.

"If I carry out his order he'll fulfill his promise".

"How?"

"I haven't the foggiest idea; he's all powerful, that's enough. I'm going to offer him what's dearest to me in all the world, since he wants it".

"But it's my only son!"

"So what?"

"But in killing this child I prevent God from keeping his word".

"It's all the same; this is what he wants; it must be done".

"But if I keep my son alive my posterity will be blessed; God said so".

"Yes, but he also said I'm to kill him; he has made this clear, so I'll obey him no matter what the result; I'll trust what he said".

How's that for trust? He doesn't worry at all about what will happen. It's something that concerns him in a very personal way but he's confident that all will turn out well since God is involved. Why can't we have the same confidence, letting God take care of all that concerns us, and dealing first with what he commands?

And, while on this subject, shouldn't we be amazed at the Rechabites? (Jer. 35). Rechab was a good man who was inspired by God to live differently from others. He had to live in tents and camps, never in houses. He gave up all he had and went out into open country. His ideas led him to avoid cultivating vines so that there would be no wine to drink; so he never planted any and never drank wine. He forbade his sons to sow corn or any type of grain, to plant trees or grow plants, so they were without corn, bread or fruit.

"So, poor Rechab, how are you going to manage? Do you think your family can do without food any more than yourself?"

"We'll eat what God sends us".

That, Fathers, is rough; with all due respect, not even the poorest religious orders carry renunciation that far. Whatever about that, this man had enough confidence to leave himself without all the usual requirements and to trust himself totally to Providence; this was to go on for three hundred and fifty years. God was so pleased with this that when he complained to Jeremiah about the stubbornness of his people who had given themselves up to pleasure, he said: "Go to those stubborn people and tell them there's one man who does this, and this, and this". Jeremiah sent for a Rechabite child to explain the extraordinary abstinence of father and children; he laid a table, with bread, wine, glasses etc. When the child arrived Jeremiah said:

"I've orders from God to tell you to drink wine".

"And I", said the child, "have orders not to drink any; for a very long time now we've never touched it; our father forbade it".

Now if this father had such trust that God would see to his family's needs without himself having to worry, and if his children were so loyal in following their father's way, then we, Fathers, can be confident that no matter what situation God puts us in he will also provide for our needs. How does our way of living compare with that of those children who, not being bound to abstain from these normal requirements, nevertheless lived in that poverty? My God, Fathers, we should ask his divine goodness for great confidence in the way everything

which concerns us will turn out; as long as we are faithful to him we won't lack anything; he himself will live in us, he'll guide us, protect us and love us; whatever we do, whatever we say, all will please him.

The third motive we have for this is that our Lord, according to St Matthew, when speaking about the trust we ought to have in God, said: "Look at the birds, who neither plant nor harvest yet God always lays the table for them everywhere; he clothes and feeds them; even the wild flowers, including the lily which is such a marvel of splendour that even Solomon in all his glory couldn't match it". Now if God looks after birds and plants in that way why won't you, who lack confidence, trust such a good and caring God? You'd actually rely on yourselves rather than on him! He can do everything and you can't do a thing, yet you've the arrogance to rely on your own efficiency rather than on his goodness, on your own poverty instead of on his wealth! Oh, how stupid people can be!

I'll take this opportunity of saying that superiors are bound to look after the needs of each individual and provide each one with what he needs. Since God has bound himself to care for the life of all his creatures, down to the smallest insect, he also wants superiors and persons in authority, as instruments of his providence, to see to it that none of the priests, students or brothers, the most important or the least significant, is short of what's necessary, even if there were one hundred, two hundred or three hundred of them here.

But the rest of you, also, must leave it to the loving care of the same Providence to take care of you, and be satisfied with what it gives you, and not be checking up on whether the community has or has not enough; don't bother about anything except seeking the kingdom of God, since his infinite wisdom will take care of everything else.

I recently asked a Carthusian superior whether he consulted the community about the running of the house. "We get the office holders together", he said, "like the sub-prior, bursar and myself; we don't bother the rest; they're involved only in chanting the praises of God and doing what the rule or obedience tells them". Here, thank God, we have the same system; let's keep to it.

We are also bound to have some assets and to make them suffice for everyone's upkeep. There was a time when the Son of God sent his disciples off without money or food; later on he found it necessary to have something, to accept alms and put something aside for his group to live on, and for helping the poor. The apostles continued this practice and St Paul says that he himself used to do manual work so as to earn

enough to help needy Christians. So, it's up to superiors to keep an eye on money matters, but also to try to make sure that this attention to such things does not interfere with their attention to virtues; they're to see to it that this custom is kept up in the Congregation, and that God reigns over everything in it; that's the primary aim they should have.

And so that each one of us may have this the rule provides a fourth motive:

In practice, then, we should not worry too much about temporal affairs. We ought to have confidence in God that he will look after us since we know for certain that as long as we are grounded in that sort of love and trust we will be always under the protection of God in heaven, we will remain unaffected by evil and never lack what we need, etc.

That's not our own idea; it's from sacred scripture where it's said: "Qui habitat in adjutorio Altissimi, in protectione Dei caeli commorabitur" (4). No evil will come to such people because everything will work out well for them; no good will be lacking to them because God won't fail to give them everything they need for both body and soul; everything will work out well for them in the end, even though it seems that every possible misfortune threatens them. That's why we can be confident that, as long as you are firm in this trust, not only will you be spared annoying troubles but all sorts of good things will happen to you; yes, you can count on that even when everything seems lost.

The saints, Fathers, the saints by this detachment from created things and from their own convenience wanted to witness before heaven and earth to their total trust in the Lord; that's why they handed over to him their possessions, pleasures, honours, their life and soul. Why? To let him be their master, to let him reign over them completely, leaving themselves totally dependent on him alone for everything, now and for eternity. That's really giving up! That's real trust! But look at how far the Saint of Saints, who opened up this path for them, went in what I've been talking about.

I'd better cut this short; time is running out.

Anyway, the Son of God said about himself that he didn't seek his own glory, only his Father's. Anything he did or said was to glorify his Father, keeping for himself only deprivation, suffering and ignominy. That's the good example by which Jesus Christ gently forces us to fall in with his ideas, his drive, his practices and advice. He never sought his own glory. But we should want to imitate him, to give up

all focusing of attention on ourselves instead of only on him alone; all we should want is to establish his glory in souls, so that his kingdom comes and his will is done on earth as it is in heaven; if we do that we have everything. These all strike me as very telling motives which should urge us to put this teaching into practice. But how do we set about it?

The means are: first, never to stop asking God for it; we are beggars, so let's act that way towards God. We are poor and weak, we need God everywhere, especially in living up to this teaching which obliges us to seek God above all else; that can be done only with his spirit. And yet it's not enough just to ask him for it; we've got to get down to putting this rule into practice, starting from tomorrow. Doing what? Putting into practice the virtues it presupposes, zeal for his glory, detachment from created things and trust in the Creator; doing this in our minds and hearts as well as in our actions; thinking often about this, and picking ourselves up again if we fall.

Second: in the same rule it says that each one of us should prefer matters involving our relationship with God to temporal affairs, spiritual health to physical health, God's glory to human approval, and be determined to prefer to do without necessities, to be slandered or tortured, or even killed, rather than lose Christ's love. When we find ourselves in situations where both the spiritual and the corporal are involved we should go for the first and leave the second; that's what God expects of us; that's letting him reign in us, when we prefer doing his work to doing our own, putting the life of the soul ahead of that of the body; yes, Fathers, putting the life of the soul ahead of that of the body. For example, suppose the sick get the chance to give God something in their sickness, they should do it.

Preferring the soul to the body, that's something from the kingdom of God, putting God's honour before human approval. Let's drink this chalice, accept embarrassment, and trust that it will work out for the best. Finally, we must resolve with the apostle to choose torture and death itself rather than be separated from the love of God. It can happen that there will be a choice between Jesus Christ and going to jail, torture, the stake, martyrdom; they'd be happy occasions, providing the opportunity for God to reign absolutely. Let's give ourselves to him, Fathers; I ask you in his holy name to do this, so that he will give us the grace to prefer troubles and death itself to the cursed danger of losing his love; we should make this resolution right now. My God, yes, Fathers, if the opportunity arises of losing reputation,

comfort, life, so that Jesus Christ may be loved and served, living and reigning everywhere, then here we are, already prepared, through his mercy. So, let's make this offering to him in advance, though it goes against the grain; let's have confidence that God will strengthen us as needed. "I'm sending you out as sheep among wolves" our Lord told his apostles. He didn't want them thinking only of what they'd say before princes and tyrants "for then", he said, "you'll be given what to say". Have no doubt, the same goes for you in similar circumstances, enabling you to speak and suffer like perfect Christians. Let him do this to us, with nothing but his unique, lovable, good pleasure in view. Who's going to give us the zeal of St Teresa, who made a vow to choose always the glory of her Lord? And not just his glory, but his greater glory! An opportunity presents itself to do something for his honour; but if, then, something else comes along of more importance she does that and postpones the first; and she undertook verbally as well as in her conscience to behave always in this way. This was also a good habit of St Ignatius: *ad majorem Dei gloriam*. A famous present-day bishop has the same habit of motivating his behaviour and the use of his authority by this intention of going for the greater good. I refer to the bishop of Cahors, who aims always for the more perfect; and it works for him (5).

If anyone of us feels a similar urge I'd say: "Fire ahead! Open your heart to this divine inspiration, follow this noble prompting which always leads on upwards". Let the others, who are crawling around below, including my wretched self, get up, please. Let's give ourselves to God to want his kingdom to grow in us, and to do something about it; that it may spread all through the clergy and laity. If we do this we'll be carrying out what our Lord and our own zeal expect of us, according to this paragraph.

Jesus Christ, my saviour, you became holy so that men could become holy; you spurned earthly kingdoms with their wealth and pomp, and cared for nothing but the reign of your Father in souls; *non quaero gloriam meam, etc., sed honorifico Patrem meam* (6). If you acted that way towards your equal, since you are God in relation to your Father, what shouldn't we do to imitate you who made us from dust and called us to keep your counsels and aim for perfection? Ah, Lord, draw us after you, give us the grace to start following your example and keeping our rule, which urges us to seek first the kingdom of God and his justice, and to hand ourselves over to him for everything else; grant that your Father may reign in us, and reign

in us yourself by making us reign in you through faith, hope and love, by humility, obedience and union with your divine Majesty. In this way we have reason to hope that we will one day reign in your glory, merited for us by your precious blood.

That, Fathers, is what we should seek in prayer; and all through the day, from the moment we get up, say to ourselves: “What will I do to enable God to reign completely in my soul? What will I do to spread the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ throughout the world? Good Jesus, teach me to do this, and see to it that I do it!”. Whenever the bell rings we should renew this prayer and our own determination to do something about it; even more especially we should do this at mass, which was instituted to acknowledge, in the best possible way, the supreme majesty of God and to obtain for ourselves the graces which are necessary if we are to live and die under the glorious reign of his eternal Son. Amen.

[After the concluding prayer Fr Vincent said, in a spirit of great humility and gratitude]

Please wait a moment, Fathers. We talk about Providence and God’s desire that we commit ourselves to it. Well, here’s how it has recently pleased his goodness to let us see just how he keeps his promises. He gave a recently deceased lady - she died yesterday the idea of doing some good to this poor, worthless congregation; to another house, not this one. In her will she left 18,000 *livres*; a tidy sum, 18,000 *livres*. O goodness of God, how great you are! How you should be loved! Such a gesture, so worthy of praise! Infinite Providence, who look after the needs of each individual, on the day we were to talk about you you reveal yourself to us! On the very day when we were to get ourselves to rely on your fatherly care for our day-to-day affairs, and devote ourselves only to the spiritual, on that very day you send along a little boy to give us the first news of this big donation!

When this boy came to the door he asked to see me; he was told I wasn’t available; he insisted, and so successfully that he eventually got up to my room and gave me the extract from the deceased lady’s will. It was the Marchioness de Vins; she had turned her attention to the poorest yet most useful house in the Congregation. It is to Marseilles that she left this sum, to be invested to provide missions in the diocese of Marseilles, and also from time to time on her estates in that area. The Parish Priest of St Nicolas du Chardonnet gave me the document later. Who would not be astonished, Fathers, at this grace of God? He

saw this poor community in danger of collapsing and propped it up and secured it by this great help. Marseilles is half way to Rome; it's a port with services to Italy and the Levant; for that reason it's very handy for the Congregation. The house takes care of the spiritual and corporal needs of the galley slaves, sick and well, and deals with the affairs of the slaves in Barbary; in these ways it's doing the same work as other houses.

Isn't this a good reason, Fathers and Brothers, to humble ourselves before God in view of the care he takes to keep us in this important house, doing this in such a practical and unexpected way? It's a reason for thanking him with all our heart for the benefit he has conferred on that poor house, where our confreres' work is blessed with such good results.

I'm saying all this to the community so that we may thank God on the one hand for the graces which he gave to this good lady, a very holy lady, as well as for the charity which his infinite mercy has shown to us through her. And, on the other hand, that we may pray to God that he himself will be the eternal reward for her soul, and that he may apply to her the merit of any good done through her gift. I ask each priest to say mass tomorrow for her intention, if they have no other obligation.

I had forgotten to tell you this, though I had intended to. That's all I have to say.

Notes

1. O'Callaghan and Burke have in the opening sentence: "my health does not allow me to address you this evening". There is no negative in the sentence in the French edition of Pémartin from which they were translating.
2. The expression *Deus virtutum* appears in many psalms in the Vulgate: 45, 56, 79, 83, 88, etc.
3. This is not from St Paul, but from the Apocalypse: 14:13.
4. This is the opening verse of Ps 90 in the Vulgate.
5. Alain de Solminihac.
6. This is a combination of parts of Jn 8:50 and 8:49.

Mary of the Poor: A Rereading of the Miraculous Medal from the Periphery

John Prager

Introduction

In Latin America one is never very far from simple expressions of Marian devotion. Mary's image is encountered not only at great shrines like Guadalupe or Luján but even painted on the back of buses. Elderly women with their beads, young people with a scapular, and the inevitable picture of the Virgin on the walls of even the poorest home give testimony to the importance of Mary in the life of the people. Yet, many of these same people couldn't explain the difference between the Visitation and the Assumption.

A somewhat similar phenomenon appears in the countries of the North Atlantic. Lourdes and Knock are just two examples that come to mind. Perhaps the catechetical instruction in the First World has been more accessible, but one wonders if doctrinal considerations motivate Marian piety any more than in the Third World.

Some would argue that these popular devotions verge on the superstitious. From one angle that seems to be the case. From the perspective of the poor, however, another analysis becomes possible (1).

For the poor and the troubled survival, not doctrine, is the primary concern. Those who have been beaten down by life look for a way out of their hard existence. People who have been excluded from the good things of life and quite often even the basic necessities of life seek some sign that God is with them. In this situation Mary appears as the bearer of God's merciful presence. She accompanies the weak in their struggles and helps them overcome the evil in their lives. She is the loving mother who understands their pain and worries about them (2).

As servants of the poor we have to understand this basic concern of our people. Perhaps, more importantly, we have to identify with that concern. It has to touch our own Marian devotion and theology.

Otherwise these things become something “tacked on” to Vincentian spirituality, not an integral part of it. This is not a call to abandon systematic theology, but rather to do it from the perspective of the poor (3). It means allowing the insights that grow out of the sufferings and the oppression of the poor to become part of the Mariological dimension of Vincentian spirituality.

Since 1830 the double family of St Vincent has promoted a very popular devotion, the Miraculous Medal (4). In this article I’d like to offer a rereading of the medal from the periphery. Many of these reflections are not particularly original. But they have not always been applied to the medal either. When we look at the medal from the place of the poor it permits an interpretation that makes sense not only for us but for the poor as well.

The medal of the poor

Although the Miraculous Medal was manifested to a Daughter of Charity and promoted by the double family it has always belonged to the people. It was the people who insisted on calling it the Miraculous Medal, even though its official title is the Medal of the Immaculate Conception.

The medal appeared at a time when rationalism and positivism were on the rise. In simple signs it called to mind a providential presence that could not be measured. In an era that rejected most symbols as sentimental and superstitious it placed a very graphic manifestation of God’s care in the hands of the poor. Against the common wisdom it recalled a very human reality: the need for symbols. Humanity has to express certain invisible realities (love, faith, commitment) in symbolic form.

In this sense the medal is not a magic token or talisman. It is the sign of God’s presence with the weak and the unimportant. It also becomes a way for the people to manifest their commitment and response to the God who cares for them.

Obviously this commitment should be more than simply wearing the medal. It really means a decision to live the gospel or enter into the process of evangelization. The medal itself can be a means of evangelization. The symbols engraved on the medal are a compendium of the gospel. Someone has called the medal the catechism of the poor. This is true because it allows illiterate people to visualize some important aspects of the good news. It is even more true because it allows

everyone educated or not to reflect on the message of salvation from the perspective of the poor. That means rereading the symbols, and above all the gospel, from the periphery or from below.

Rereading the medal from the reality of the poor

The Mary of the medal

Classical theology always emphasized the union between Mary and her son, but tended to separate her from the rest of the community. The focus on her personal privileges set her apart from the rest of humanity (5). Vatican II changed the perspective of mariology by including her in the document on the Church rather than publishing a separate document (6). Just as the starting point for christology has changed from “above” to “below”, a further shift in mariology has come about with the reflections that begin with the historical Mary.

We can never forget that the glorious Virgin was also the humble woman of Nazareth. She was the wife of a labourer and raised her child in the poverty of a small unimportant town. As a woman of the first century in Galilee she not only experienced the social and economic oppression of the poor but also the religious marginalization of Jewish women. The hardships and struggles of the people are not foreign to her because they were her own (7). She represents the community because historically she was part of the community.

The Miraculous Medal speaks of the Immaculate Conception, the one who has found favour with God, Mary who is “full of grace” from the very first moment of her existence. This is not just a personal privilege but a charism given for the sake of all humanity. God has chosen a poor woman from among the poor to participate in his salvific action (8).

Mary is “engraced” because God wishes to save all of humanity. The Immaculate Conception is part of the good news of a God who wishes to save his people from sin and its consequences. The dogma becomes a message of hope for the poor because it offers the hope of liberation. The God who liberated Mary also invites the poor to participate in the Kingdom of God.

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is not meant to make us lose sight of Mary’s ongoing process of responding to God’s presence. In the scriptures she is above all the model disciple who hears God’s word and keeps it. She is not the passive receptacle that some have made her. She had to struggle with temptation. She did not always understand. She had to make her own difficult decision to follow

Jesus. Like all disciples she had to live the gospel in her own historical situation. This is why Luke could easily place the Magnificat on her lips. Her experience is that of all those who say “yes” to God’s will. She represents, and is in solidarity with, all the “little ones” who recognise the wonders present in salvation. Above all she gives voice to the hopes of the poor who wait for liberation from oppression. God will act, as he acted in Mary, to free them from injustice.

The rays from Mary’s hands

St Catherine explained that the rays were the graces which God wished to share with humankind (9). In a simple way Catherine is describing the profound mystery of God’s intervention in history. The promises of the Kingdom are becoming a reality. The Kingdom has begun and continues to irrupt in situations that are filled with evil and seem hopeless. First and foremost this is good news for the poor.

The rays from Mary’s hands remind us that salvation comes through humanity. Mary represents the action of God in and through human persons in real moments of history. The reign of God comes about through the cooperation of men and women in the real situations of life.

God’s action in human history does not necessarily mean an extraordinary miracle. Grace takes many forms. Good news for the poor can mean organization, capacitation, justice, peace, solidarity. The promise of new life is fulfilled when situations of oppression and suffering are changed and a new reality is created for the poor. Quite often the signs of God’s presence and action are ordinary and small victories over evil. That does not make them any less acts of grace or experience of the Kingdom.

The two hearts

The centre of the gospel is love. God’s love takes human form in Jesus’ love. We have only to glance at a few pages of the New Testament to see the many ways God’s faithful love can be lived in different moments and different situations. In each scene Jesus tries to achieve the well-being of the person involved. At times this means healing or sharing with the hungry. Sometimes he speaks a harsh word of challenge or a difficult truth. He ate with outcasts and pardoned sinners. He embraced children and invited the weary to share their burdens

with him. The gospels do not present a blueprint, or exhaust all of the possibilities for communicating God's love. Rather, they point out that love's expressions change with the situation.

Besides these general ideas a certain Vincentian sensitivity must guide our reflections on the heart of Jesus depicted on the medal. Jesus is the Word made flesh of a poor man. All of the expressions of love mentioned in the gospels took place from within the reality of the poor. The primary recipients of his love were the most abandoned. He came to preach the good news to the poor. They have a special place in his heart.

The Immaculate Heart is more than a symbol of Mary's love for Jesus' least brothers and sisters. The symbol takes us beyond her personal attitudes and serves as a model for all the disciples. The poor, who are constantly under her protection, must also occupy a special place in the hearts and the actions of all followers of Jesus. Just as Jesus and Mary had to find ways to express evangelical love according to particular events, we have to find the manner of making the good news a reality in the lives of the poor today.

The cross and the letter M

The core mystery of Christianity is the dying and rising of Jesus. Salvation comes through the paschal mystery. The truth of that belief is closely related to the message of the kingdom. The cross and resurrection are not isolated events added on to the end of Jesus' life. They are rather events that are a direct consequence of his life and preaching.

Salvation comes through the cross, but this does not make our faith a cult of suffering. Jesus suffered because he chose to be faithful to his Father and his mission of preaching the Kingdom. It is his love and fidelity that save us. Historically the good news was not good news for everyone. In the face of great opposition Jesus chose to continue his mission. Faithfulness to God his Father and love of his brothers and sisters were more important than anything else, even the preservation of his own life.

The cross speaks of love and fidelity, not as abstract ideals but as historical realities. The message of the kingdom brings Jesus into conflict with those who only find God in power and beauty. Those who have a vested interest in maintaining a system of oppression and injustice refuse to make the changes necessary to live as brothers and

sisters. In this situation of conflict Jesus chooses to stand with the poor and the weak. In his own suffering he identifies with those who suffer. From the cross he questions an image of God who sides with the powerful and justifies oppression. The cross tells us that God is found among the poor and in solidarity with those who suffer. Fidelity to the Kingdom always means a decision to love as Jesus loved (11).

The cross is only emptiness, pain and failure if it is not seen in the light of the resurrection. The fulness of the good news is that God raised up his faithful Son. New life springs from a hopeless situation. Death and oppression do not have the last word. In the end, God's love, the message of the Kingdom, is victorious.

The letter M entwined with the cross speaks of Mary's participation in the paschal mystery. On the one hand it calls to mind her presence at Calvary and her own suffering that came from following Jesus. On another level, however, Mary represents all disciples. The paschal mystery has to be a way of life for all followers of Jesus. The dying and rising of Jesus are not just moments that have come and gone. The decision to follow Jesus means coming to salvation by the same road he took. New life comes through fidelity and love. Practically speaking, that implies siding with the poor and oppressed as he did. Often that leads to conflict, suffering and paying a personal price. The price is not always death. Changes of attitude, inconvenience, the misunderstandings of others, and any number of other difficulties can be the cost of discipleship. The message of hope here is that our personal salvation and the liberation of the poor come through a willingness to accept the cross.

The twelve stars

Most commentators on the medal recognize the twelve stars as a reference to the woman in chapter 12 of the Book of Revelation (12). There is some discussion among biblical scholars about the meaning of the woman. Most, however, see her as the image of God's people. The woman is probably a reference to Mary as representative of God's people. The message is one of hope for a persecuted Church (13).

The twelve stars remind us that salvation is an ecclesial reality. We come to salvation in and with the community and not as individuals. Mary represents the Church because she was a member of God's people. She accompanied the Christian community and continues to be with the Church on the road to salvation. A parallel exists between

Mary's mission of bringing forth Jesus into the world and the Church's mission of evangelization. Both are part of God's intervention in history to make the gospel a reality.

Any reflection on the Church must underline one thing very clearly: we are the Church of the poor or we are not the Church. This does not mean that only the poor are saved. It does mean, however, that salvation depends on the way we relate to the poor. If the Church and its members do not participate in a new life that brings people in from the margins of society the gospel has little meaning. Perhaps that is why the poor have always sought out Mary, even when the Church has neglected them. Her maternal care for those on the periphery, and the people's recognition of her love, are a constant reminder of the Church's mission to preach the good news to the poor.

Conclusion

The Constitutions and Statutes of both the Daughters of Charity and the Congregation of the Mission mention the special place that the Miraculous Medal has in their Marian devotion (14). Marian piety is not the heart of Vincentian spirituality. But it is not unimportant either. The medal, when viewed from the perspective of the poor, becomes another way of looking at the key themes of Vincentian life and mission. It reinforces our Vincentian spirit because its symbols invite us to think and pray more deeply about that spirit. The medal can also strengthen our commitment because it is a simple way of identifying with the poor who wear the medal as an expression of their love for Mary, the poor woman of Nazereth who always accompanies them.

Notes

1. There has been a reevaluation of popular religiosity among many liberation theologians. More and more the people's expression of faith is seen as a manifestation of a desire for liberation, rather than an instrument of oppression. See, for example, Segundo Galilea *El Camino de la Espiritualidad*. Bogotá, Paulinas, 1985, pp 5256.
2. A number of works have come out in recent years on the topic of Mariology from the perspective of the poor:

Boff, L: *The Maternal Face of God*, New York, Harper and Row. 1988.

Codina, V: *Mariología desde los Pobres*, in "De la Modernidad a la Solidaridad", Lima, CEP, 1985.

Elizondo, V: *La Morenita, Evangelizadora de las Américas*. St Louis. Liguori, 1981.

- Mesters, C: *María, Madre de Jesús*. Madrid, Paulinas, 1987.
- Mier, S: *María en el Evangelio Liberador*; Bogotá, IndoAmerican Press. 1991.
- Marcos, Pablo de: *Nuestra Señora de América Latino*. Bogota. Paulinas. 1986.
- Gebara. I & M Bingemer: *Mary, Mother of God. Mother of the Poor*. New York, Orbis, 1989.
3. Prager, J P: *The Poor as the Starting Point for Vincentian Studies: a Liberation Hermeneutic*, in "Vincentiana" 35 (1991), pp 140 ff.
 4. Besides the traditional works by Aladel, Crapez, Chevalier and Misermont. there are a number of newer works on the medal:

Dirvin, J: *St Catherine Labouré of the Miraculous Medal*, New York, Farrar. Strauss and Cudahy, 1958.

Las Apariciones de la Virgen María a Santa Catalina Labours, Salamanca, CEME, 1981.

De Dios, V: *La Medalla Milagrosa: Doctrina y Celebración*, Salamanca, CEME, 1986.

Laurentin, R: *Catherine Labouré et la Médaille Miraculeuse*, Paris, Lethiellieux, 1976, 1979, two volumes.

Laurentin, R: *Vie Authentique de Catherine Labouré*, Paris, DDB, 1980, two volumes.

María, Esperanza latinoamericana, Bogotá, Vicentinos, 1980.
 5. It is interesting to note that both St Vincent and St Louise had very classical mariologies. See Martinez, B: *La senorita Le Gras y Santa Luisa Marillac*, Salamanca, CEME, 1991, p 183; and Dodin, A: *Le culte de Marie et l'expérience religieuse de Vincent de Paul*, in "Vincentiana" (1975).
 6. Lumen Gentium, 52-68.
 7. It is interesting to note how few images of Mary as a poor person exist in our houses.
 8. God's choice and action in the life of a poor woman were seen even more clearly in the virginity of Mary; Macquarrie. J: *Mary for all Christians*. Grand Rapids, Ferdmans, 1990, pp 39-40.
 9. Dirvin: op. cit., p 100.
 10. Hendrickx, H: *The Infancy Narratives*, Manila, East Asian, Pastoral Institute, 1975, p106.
 11. It seems to me that this is St Vincent's insight.
 12. Cid, E: *La Medalla Milagrosa, expresión gráfica de la mariología* in "Las Aparaciones de la Virgen María a Sta. Catalina Laboure", Salamanca, CEME, 1981, p 165.
 13. Brown, R et al.: *Mary in the New Testament*, New York, Paulist, 1978, pp 231-239.
 14. CM Constitutions 49:2; DC Statutes 7.

Forum

A VINCENTIAN PRIESTHOOD

Having been ordained a priest in June 1991 now (December 1991) find myself asking questions as to what is a priest, what does it mean to be a priest in today's world? And so in this article I look at the influences of St Vincent on the priesthood I have come to share in, and in this way I begin to link up my own identity as a Vincentian and as a priest.

Two moments or events stand out very much for me since my ordination. The first is when I went to Knock during the summer to help out hearing confessions. I spent a week there and met hundreds of people who came to Knock for all sorts of reasons. The second was when I went to our parish in Goodmayes to give a penitential service, just before Christmas. Both of these events were hard work and very rewarding. I mention them because they stand out in my mind as moments where my identity as a Vincentian and as a priest felt as one. I felt very Vincentian and also very much like a priest.

The reason I mention this is because since September 1984 I have been in formation to become a Vincentian priest. During that formation, somewhere along the line, I began to feel like a Vincentian. Then when I made vows I was officially accepted by the Community to become a Vincentian. And I have been a Vincentian for quite some time, relatively speaking! As for priesthood, this is new; and my experience and understanding of it are quite limited. At times I feel very much like a priest, and then at other times very much like a Vincentian. And I see the need to bring the two together in some sort of synthesis. So that while on the one hand I am both priest and Vincentian, I am also becoming a Vincentian priest.

I remember while I was in primary school at home in Dundalk I began to serve mass. I enjoyed this very much mainly because it kept me busy during mass and I felt I was doing something useful. One of the highlights of serving was to ring the bell at the consecration; it was another thing to do. I remember once, as I was about to ring the bell, thinking to myself how good it must be to be a priest: he does

everything during mass, he even gets to eat and drink; and I remember saying to myself I'd love to be a priest.

For a seven year old that reason is quite adequate, I think. Remembering this story of the first time I wanted to be a priest makes me think of how much has changed and how that vague notion of priesthood took on flesh and blood in the shape of the Vincentians. When I was at school in Castleknock College I met with Vincentians there that I admired and wanted to become like them; the fact that they were priests was somehow secondary. I wanted to become a Vincentian, and in my eyes that was what gave these men their identity and their sense of life.

I now find myself trying to take on the identity of priesthood, and live what that means, and at the same time to live out my own Vincentian calling. Being ordained a priest seemed somehow to complete things for me and there was, and is now, a sense of wholeness being a Vincentian priest.

I feel I need to come to know and try to understand the person of St Vincent in a deeper and more personal way. This may seem like an obvious thing to say, and in a way it is; but now especially, being ordained, I feel I need to give the priesthood that I share in some shape and definition. And I see that while coming to understand Vincent I will be at the same time growing into the priesthood. It is the example and spirit of Vincent de Paul that marks and shapes my own understanding of priesthood. And so I need to come to know the person of St Vincent, to be touched by his vision, by his openness to God, by his love for people, especially the needy, and by his willingness to be changed by them.

Two things strike me as very important in the life of Vincent. The first is his own unique relationship with Christ. Coming to see something of Vincent's relationship with Christ can act as an inspiration for myself as well as giving mine a particular thrust and shape. Christ revealed himself to Vincent in a particular way, through people who were very needy.

The other thing that strikes me about Vincent, which is important today, is his belief in divine providence. For Vincent, Christ is the "Evangelizer of the Poor". In his conference on the purpose of the Congregation he says:

... to make God known to the poor, to announce Jesus Christ to them, to tell them that the kingdom of heaven is at hand and that it is for the poor. O how great that is..., so sublime is it to preach

the gospel to the poor that it is above all the office of the Son of God (XII 80).

Vincent offers a vision of Christ as the evangelizer of the poor. And it is this Christ we are called to follow. To follow a man who preaches the Good News to people, who goes amongst them, who touches them and tells them that God loves them and cares very deeply for them, and that S/He is very close to them. He gives people hope and a reason to live in a particular way. So it is important for us also to come to know the Christ of Vincent; to come to know him from texts such as Lk 4:18 and from one of Vincent's favourite texts Mt 25:31-46, and many others. The kind of Christ we know, and are in relationship with, will say a lot about the type of lifestyle we lead. The attitudes I have towards people reflect who Jesus is for me. I believe Vincent would have agreed with Martin Luther King when he said:

Any religious minister concerned about the souls of people and not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economics that strangle them and the social conditions that imprison them, is a molly coddle religion awaiting burial.

The religion that Vincent practised was not a molly coddle one.

Vincent made a choice in following Christ the evangelizer of the poor. He did not choose to follow Christ the teacher, or Christ the healer, although these obviously were part of his ministry. This choice made a difference to the way he led his life and the kinds of attitudes he had. It was Christ the evangelizer of the poor that inspired him and enabled him to be true to himself and his calling. It is good from time to time to see who is the Christ that inspires me, that gives me life. Is it Christ the teacher, the healer, the preacher, or a whole mixture of things? Because the kind of Christ we are inspired by will reflect itself in our lives. So, through doing this, we will be able to make connections between the life we lead and the faith we profess.

Another thing that is very striking about Vincent, and which I feel is important for priesthood today, is his belief in providence. He had an unshakable belief that God spoke to him through the events of his own life and the lives of those around him. This was not just a pious notion but something that made quite an impact on his life and on the life of the community. And it worked, because he steeped himself in prayer and immersed himself in the lives of those around him. He says:

The rest will come in time, grace has its moments. Let us abandon ourselves to the providence of God and be very careful not to run ahead of it. If it pleases God to give me some consolation in our vocation, it is this: That I think, so it seems to me, that we have tried to follow his great providence in everything (II 453).

Vincent allowed events to speak to him, to tell him something of God. He had enough trust in God to listen to them and allow them to lead him where they did. Vincent communicated the message of the gospel, that Christ came among us, he died and is risen. As St Paul puts it, our message is “Christ among us, the hope of glory”. Hope is the essential message of Christ. Belief in providence gives great hope to people, to believe that God is at work amongst Her/His people, that S/He cares enough to be a part of our lives. People long to know that there is more to life than what they see, hear and experience; to know that God is in it all. Vincent had a great belief in providence and brought great hope to people. Priests are people who are called to witness to hope, to be people of hope, to be hopeful people.

I remember well a moment in my own life, it was after a long time of trying to decide as to whether or not I would apply to make vows in the community; I finally wrote and sent off the letter of application to the Provincial. That evening I sat down in the garden to say evening prayer. It was the feast of St James and so there were different psalms from those of the day and one of the psalms was psalm 115. In this psalm the refrain was: “My vows to the Lord I will fulfill”. As for me, this was like a little affirmation from God that I had done the right thing in sending the application to make vows in the community. And then a couple of days later I was at mass where they were acting out the gospel and I was asked to be St James!

In a wider sense I believe at the moment the vocation shortage in our community is providential. Part of the reason I say this is that we are now praying for vocations and also we can no longer maintain everything we do and so we must see where it is we are most needed in today’s world. It gives us a chance to change and move with the signs of the times.

All of what I have said about Vincent’s view of Christ and his great belief in providence gives shape to my identity as priest. In reading Vatican II’s Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, §4, I saw that: “The primary duty of the priest is the proclamation of the gospel to all”. This seemed a little strange to me as I would initially have thought that the primary duty of priests was the celebration of the

Church's sacraments or the pastoral care of the people of God or the leadership of the Christian community. But all of these are secondary to the primary task: the proclamation of the gospel.

This seems to tie in very well with our own identity as Vincentians, in the Congregation of the Mission; that is, to evangelize the poor, to preach the good news. Both sides, the Vincentian and that of priesthood, seem woven together very nicely and complement each other very well.

There are obviously many, many other things that could be said about how we find our identity as priests and Vincentians and combine them both. I have chosen just two, the first being the question of who is the Jesus Christ Vincent de Paul introduces us to? Secondly, I looked at Vincent's strong belief in divine providence, the belief that God is at work in the lives of people, at how this brings hope, and finally at how, as priests, we are called to be a people of hope. I would like to finish with a quotation that James Cahalan had at the end of his article *St Vincent and the Priesthood* in COLLOQUE No. 7, page 58:

In practical terms, the only priest who will always prove necessary to people is the priest who is conscious of the full meaning of his priesthood; the priest who believes profoundly, who professes his faith with courage, who prays fervently, who teaches with deep conviction, who serves, who puts into practice the programme of the Beatitudes, who knows how to love disinterestedly, who is close to everyone and especially to those who are most in need. (John Paul II, Letter to Priests, Passion Sunday 1979).

Daniel O'Connell

ST VINCENT ON THE PRACTICE OF BROTHERLY LOVE

On 30 May 1659 Vincent de Paul gave a conference on the 12th paragraph of the 2nd chapter of our Common Rules, dealing with acts of charity towards our neighbour.

He says in the conference:

God raised up the little company as he has raised up all the other companies for his love and good pleasure. All tend to love him, but all love him in different ways. Carthusians love him by their solitude, Capuchins by their poverty, others by singing his praises and we, my brothers, if we love him we must prove that we do by

drawing people to love God and the neighbour, and to love their neighbour for God and God for the neighbour. We are chosen by God as instruments of his immense and fatherly love which he wishes to establish and flow into the souls of people (XII 262).

Two comments here:

1. This is a good charism statement by Vincent, clear and convincing. If Vincent does not know what our charism is, God help us! But he does know and he tells us that our charism is about loving God and our neighbour.

2. Prior to my reading these words of Vincent I did not realise that he expects me to be “an instrument of the immense and fatherly love of God”. I know that Vincent is patron of charitable works. These words reveal Vincent’s great love for God and for people. Perhaps this is the source of his apostolate.

Speaking about the second way of showing love, by not contradicting others, Vincent says:

Contradiction which divides the hearts of people, let us avoid it as a fever which weakens, as a pest which ravages, the holiest of companies. Let us drive it away by our prayers (XII 267).

These are strong words based on a long life of experience of community life, written by a holy priest. Given that I live in a different age and culture (cf Aidan McGing’s article in COLLOQUE 24, Autumn 1991) Vincent tells me to be careful about how I express my disagreement with the views of other people. Frank Carson, the comedian, talking about his jokes reminds us that it is “how you tell ‘em”. Vincent says that we must respect the views of others. “They express them plainly, let us accept them, plainly”. He encourages us to express our views as we understand the situation, just as others express things the way they understand the situation. We use the expression “avoid it like the plague”. Vincent uses similar words about contradicting others.

The 3rd act of charity consists in knowing how to support one another. Vincent says that

No one is perfect. Since all people have their faults there is no one who does not need support (XII 268).

We are sometimes happy and sometimes sad. Yesterday a colleague sees that we are very happy, today he finds us very melancholic. Since we would wish that in the excesses of our

bizarre nature we would find support in a colleague, is it not just that we would support him as we encounter him? (XII 269).

Becoming aware of our own weaknesses he says that: “We are in debt to those who mix with us... This will help us to see the obligation that we have to support others” (XII 269).

At one point in the conference he says:

I ask you, Gentlemen, to pray frequently for one another so that all the missionaries will always love one another. Let us console ourselves that this is what happens at the moment and let us pray to God that he will never allow us to become careless in the practice of brotherly love (XII 266).

Amen to that.

Noel Travers

ENDORSEMENT

I would like to give a hearty endorsement to Aidan McGing’s proposal for a commentary on the Common Rules that was in COLLOQUE 24, pp. 43-24. Prior to writing my history of the Congregation (wasn’t that sometime in the last century?), I had accepted Coste’s theory that St Vincent borrowed most of the Common Rules from the Jesuits. Of course I had occasionally wondered why, if this was so, it took him so many years to complete them. When writing the history I did a rather superficial comparison with the Jesuit rules and concluded that Vincent’s borrowings were principally from the day-to-day practicalities of living. The whole idea of the end and nature of the Congregation, virtues, and allied topics seemed to be original. So, too, was the constant reference to Scripture. The research that Fr McGing proposes would be long and complex, but I believe that it would greatly enlarge our understanding of how he thought and worked. At the 1980 Assembly Mick Prior used the phrase “Vincentian fundamentalism” to describe the reliance on verbal quotations separated from their historical context. Incidentally, in reference to the practicalities of daily life, I have often been struck by the similarities between the rules of the *colegios mayores* in the great universities of Spain and the Common Rules. So many of these things seem to have been common coin. Alas, with so many great projects in Community life and history, who will do it?

Stafford Poole

OBITUARIES

Father Kevin Cronin CM

Kevin Cronin was born in Roscommon on 9 March 1907. He was one of three children, having a brother Fergus, who joined the Society of Jesus, and a sister Hannah, who joined the Dominican sisters.

At St Vincent's College, Castleknock, he first met the confreres and came at an early stage to know something about the life and work of St Vincent de Paul, to whose philosophy he remained deeply attached for the rest of his life. In 1927 he joined the Community and took his BA and MA in History at University College, Dublin, with First Class Honours and Distinction. His historical studies were never a matter of individual events and personalities but rather a grasping of the movement of human growth and development on the broadest of canvases and to which all aspects of life made a contribution. On one occasion he mentioned to me that he had a conflicting desire to be an architect; this he left behind, but the interest in architecture, building and matters artistic remained with him all his life.

On completion of his theological studies he was ordained in 1932 and his first appointment was as lecturer in Ecclesiastical History in the Irish College, Paris. In that city and country he found scope for his historical interests, in Gothic architecture, the world and environment of St Vincent de Paul in the 17th century and the explosion of modern art and literature in the 20s and 30s. It also brought him, in his first professional appointment, in contact with young adults in a collegiate setting entering on a life of service to their Church and their community. In this case it was seminarians who would return as priests to work in Ireland after ordination.

To his mind the seminary training in Paris could not be a course followed behind the doors and walls of the college without experiencing a great European capital city and country. The students needed to know not only about the roots of their Europeanness but also about the ways in which that tradition was struggling to express itself in modern times. One of the things essential for a student was to be exposed to these developments and not to be sheltered from them. He spent three happy years at this work before his appointment in 1935 to St Mary's College, Strawberry Hill, as lecturer in Religion and History.

For a second time his work was to be with young adults preparing for a life of service to the community and in a college which incorporated

one of the outstanding buildings in British architecture. There he met a History lecturer, one Fr John Hurley CM, with whom he taught History and Religion for fifteen years. What a contrast they were in style, method and approach and what a team they made! And they both died within a few years of each other as members of the Strawberry Hill community in which they had first worked together fifty-five years previously.

In religion teaching he worked closely with, and on the ideas of, Fr James Thompson CM. These he developed over the next fifteen years. This eventually led to the publication of a small pioneering and influential book called *Teaching the Religion Lesson* which was illustrated by a student at the time, Brother Gabriel Barnfield FSC. It was to be a cardinal principle in all his work that the various artistic forms should be used in expressing the Good News.

This book was translated into several languages and even as late as 1968 was being reprinted yet again. As in the Irish College, Paris, he had seen that the message needed a new presentation.

Post World War II enthusiasm and the 1944 Education Act opened up new horizons and it was into this world that he was appointed Principal in 1948 on the retirement of Dr Gerard Shannon CM. One of his first actions was to create a collection of works of art to hang in corridors and rooms combining both Old Master prints and original paintings and drawings of the Modern English and Irish School. Parallel with this was his decision to set about restoring the Walpole and Waldegrave buildings which were then experiencing their thirty-year dry rot cycle.

In response to Government schools' policies the college numbers had to increase and his architectural flair came into its own as the need for new building, teaching, residential and social, became obvious. His motto on such matters was "Always go for the best". Sir Albert Richardson, president of the Royal Academy and a devotee of the medieval Gothic and Gothic Revival style, was appointed architect for the expansion. Jointly they turned to the French experience and looked for French examples for their ideas, while keeping in mind the Strawberry Hill "Gothic" style. The medieval cathedral at Albi was chosen as the model for the new college chapel. The stained glass for the fifteen windows, representing the mysteries of the Rosary, was commissioned from Gabriel Loire, the world-famous curator of the stained glass studios at Chartres and a pioneer in the modern style of stained glass. He was particularly proud of the windows, of the fact that they were donated by the staff and students, past and present, and

friends of the college, that the medieval and modern blended so well, that they were unique in Britain. One of the few times when I ever saw him approaching what might remotely be called anger occurred about ten years ago. One of the Sunday Colour Supplements carried a major feature on a new stained glass window for Salisbury Cathedral, I think it was, commissioned from Gabriel Loire. The article stated that this was the only example of this famous artist's work in Britain and everyone should come and see it. "Write to the Editor" he said to me "and tell him we have fifteen windows by this artist and the public are welcome to come any time". I did write but there was no answer.

The Chapel was to be central to the campus along with the Library as a visible sign of the harmony between the spiritual and intellectual life of the College. But there was a problem of DES (Department of Education and Science) funding. DES would not put money into a chapel and certainly not one of the proportions envisaged. Kevin's solution was to kill several birds with one stone; persuade DES to build a one storey library with very strong foundations and walls and then build the chapel on top of it. You then have a more imposing building, a cheaper building and, best of all, Faith and Reason were united in a visible way.

It also expressed an aspect of his own temperament when he had a good idea which needed implementation he had a way of giving the impression that unless you came to his aid the whole thing would fall apart and you couldn't let that happen, could you? There was accompanying this impression a waving hand movement, well known to his friends, which conveyed this sentiment and was unique to him. The Chapel-Library complex was completed, and blessed by Cardinal Godfrey in 1962.

The next major expansion was the move by 1966 to a mixed male-female residential college, the idea of which was revolutionary in Catholic colleges at the time but one which he succeeded in convincing the Board of Governors was essential to the development of the College and to the widening of its horizons.

It was little wonder, therefore, that he was awarded the CBE (Commander of the British Empire) in the 1962 New Year's Honours List and shortly afterwards was made a Knight Commander of the Order of St John of Jerusalem.

In 1969, at the age of 62 and having made his contribution to St Mary's future, he responded to Cardinal Heenan's invitation to develop a programme for Archdiocese of Westminster parents which

would bridge the gap between the RE teaching they had received at school and what their children were now experiencing as a result of the new methods of teaching and explaining the faith which he himself had played a major part in initiating and were now emerging after the Vatican Council.

He entered this new career with Sr Gemma Brennan with great enthusiasm and together they formed a highly motivated and motivating team which soon attracted many co-workers. As a pair they were fondly referred to as the Duke and Duchess of Kensington because they had an operating base at the former Maria Assumpta College in Kensington Square, as well as for their famous hospitality towards their helpers and associates.

This work developed very quickly into the Westminster Adult Religious Education Centre (WAREC) and led the way in demonstrating what good Catholic Adult Religious Education could look like. The key factors which they identified were: 1. Setting of the agenda by the “customer”; 2. A very largely lay committee developing the plans; 3. Holding of meetings in peoples’ homes or where they wished to hold them. All the resources available in the diocese were tapped and a wide network of speakers and organisers was built up. It went from strength to strength. He remained in this work for fifteen years and his experience, as in the catechetical movement in the 30s and 40s, led to the publication of two books in Adult RE: *Into the Future* (1977) and *Adult RE Theory into Practice* (1984) both in collaboration with Sr Gemma and the *Daily Mail* cartoonist Haro.

On the reorganisation of the Education Services in the Archdiocese WAREC was absorbed into the new structure in 1984 and Kevin “retired” once again. He continued to be based at Strawberry Hill, apart from the years immediately after 1969 when he lived with the community in Sacred Heart parish, Mill Hill. To the community in Strawberry Hill he, along with John Hurley, became a father-figure, each in his own distinctive way giving a heart and soul to community life. Each had the greatest respect for the abilities and qualities of the other.

During his later years of retirement he devoted much time to writing a book on the spirituality of the mass, which remains unfinished. He also acted as chaplain to St Catherine’s Convent of Mercy, Twickenham.

In January 1992 he suffered two severe strokes and was taken to Charing Cross Hospital where he died peacefully on 12 February and went to join his brother and sister, who had both died in the previous twelve months, with the Lord.

At the end of his life, in hospital, many visitors remarked how physically strong he appeared. Yet, from his student days he had had recurrent bouts of illness. He did not, however, allow these, or other professional problems in life, to get him down. He used to say: "Whatever job you get, enjoy it". Part of his enjoyment was to organise a game of cards on a festive occasion or to arrange a visit to Epsom or Sandown for one of the big meetings. The more people he could bring into these occasions the more he enjoyed it.

In addition to his outstanding professional abilities one of Kevin's greatest gifts was his love of people. His extended family was to be found in large numbers all over the world. Past students of St Mary's College over fifty years became part of it and people of all classes and ages were continually joining it. With them he shared, unobtrusively, a deep and quiet faith. In all their lives there remains a large gap which only the Lord himself can fill.

In Kevin Cronin I think one can see how providence works to bring together in one person gift, opportunity, temperament, initiative and grace to form in a very singular way a full and rounded life in the service of the Lord.

Fr Pat Bannigan CM, in speaking of Kevin, used to say: "Kevin's a prince". It seemed fitting, therefore, at his requiem that we should lead into the final prayer with Horatio's words:

Goodnight, sweet prince,
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.

Desmond Beirne CM

KEVIN CRONIN CM

Born: Roscommon, 9 March 1907.

Entered the CM: 4 October 1927.

Final vows: 1 November 1929.

Ordained a priest in Holy Cross College, Clonliffe, by Dr Francis Wall, auxiliary bishop of Dublin, 9 October 1932.

APPOINTMENTS

1932-1935 Irish College, Paris.

1935-1969 St Mary's, Strawberry Hill.

1969-1974 Sacred Heart, Mill Hill.

1975-1992 St Mary's, Strawberry Hill.

Died 12 February 1992.

Brother Thomas Gilmartin CM

Brother Tommy Gilmartin, the last Vincentian brother to live in Ireland, was a man of exceptional qualities. He was a man young at heart even to the end, with a great sense of fun and good humour. Allied to this he had a quiet, solid spirituality, with a deep love of the eucharist.

He joined the Congregation on 24 July 1925 and took his final vows in August 1927. His first appointment was to Gateacre, Liverpool, then to the old St Joseph's, Temple Road, Blackrock. He spent the next eighteen years at St Patrick's, Drumcondra, where he was obviously very happy from the way he spoke about them, but for a brother in the Little Company in those days life was anything but easy.

His life in Phibsboro, where he spent forty-two years, was more relaxed but Tommy never took advantage of that. He was the first to hit the floor every morning in St Peter's, when he would open the sacristy, prepare for masses, open the church and prepare the breakfasts. All this was done with the usual "smile and good crack". His work around the church would keep him busy until he closed the church about 8.00 p.m.

If he was not serving mass he would be attending and watching carefully from his chair behind the old high altar.

Vatican II and all that arrived when he was well into his middle years. Changing altars was no problem for Tommy; he was able to change his outlook with no difficulty. Becoming a minister of the eucharist was for him a great joy.

He had a special apostolate with the people, particularly with the old and infirm. One could see him so often after mass consoling or affirming some old dear in a quiet corner of the church.

He was also a confrere with great sporting interests; Gaelic football and hurling were his loves. Many a Sunday afternoon would be spent either at Croke Park or, if it were Rugby or horse racing, "glued" to his portable TV. He also enjoyed his little jar, but that too was always, like everything else, in moderation.

He was a great Irishman in the sense of his love for his country and for his own Co. Leitrim. He never lost his roots, his love of his people at home and his relatives in Clontarf. No, Tommy never lost his roots.

Tommy's last months were spent in considerable pain and discomfort. He had two major operations and never lived to enjoy a well-earned retirement. However, Tommy never complained.

When he received the sacrament of the sick he smiled and said:
“I’ll go straight to heaven now”.

The Province has lost a great confrere and I a great friend.

Donal Gallagher CM

THOMAS GILMARTIN CM

Born: Mohill, Co. Leitrim, 12 December 1908.

Entered the CM: 24 July 1925.

Final vows: 21 August 1927.

APPOINTMENTS

1926-1927 St Vincent’s, Gateacre.

1927-1932 St Joseph’s, Blackrock.

1932-1950 St Patrick’s, Drumcondra.

1950-1992 St Peter’s, Phibsboro.

Died 19 February 1992.