**THE COMMON RULES**

**AND THE REVITALISATION OF THE IDENTITY OF THE CM**

This week the Congregation of the Mission began the preparatory celebrations to give thanks to God because on April 17, 1625, it will be four hundred years since the signing of the contract of foundation of what St. Vincent de Paul wanted to call the "Little Company". "Put on the spirit of Jesus Christ" is the motto proposed for this time of preparation, which the Superior General inaugurated by symbolically opening the door of this Jubilee in Rome, thanking God for the gift of the Society to the Church and asking, through the intercession of our saints and blessed, that Jesus Christ may always and everywhere be the "Rule of the Mission".

In this regard, the final document of our last General Assembly (2022), referring to the revitalisation of our missionary identity, reminded us:

Our spiritual life integrates and animates our community and our missionary activity, which are essential to our Vincentian identity. Therefore, we commit ourselves to "*clothe ourselves with the Spirit of Christ*" and to rediscover the contemplative dimension of our Vincentian spirituality as we constantly strive to be faithful to prayer, the vows and our own virtues (C 28-50). We also commit ourselves to live the sacraments, to constantly read, reflect and pray with the Word of God, the Common Rules, the Constitutions and Statutes, as well as other Vincentian sources, and to participate in Vincentian formation sessions.

With similar expressions, the group of assembly members from Europe and the East (CEVIM) proposed:

To pray assiduously the Word of God and read the Constitutions and the writings of St. Vincent de Paul and share in community how they challenge us.

For his part, the Superior General has insisted through his communications and in the course of the General Assembly itself on the value of the Common Rules for our missionary life, encouraging us to drink constantly from them.

It seemed appropriate, therefore, to reflect at this annual Assembly of CEVIM on the place that the Common Rules can occupy for the revitalisation of our missionary identity at the present time.

In this communication, I will recall the process of drafting the Common Rules, trying to underline what St. Vincent de Paul intended in proposing them to the missionaries and urging them to keep them always. Then I will reflect on the dynamisms they offer us to revitalise our missionary identity.

**I.- SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL AND THE COMMON RULES**

**1.- Drafting process of the Common Rules**

The starting point of what will become the Common Rules is to be found in the document signed on 17 April 1625 between the Lords of Gondi and Monsieur Vincent de Paul before the public notaries: although for the moment the only member was Vincent himself, the "company, confraternity or congregation of the Fathers or priests of the Mission" was established.

The *Act of Association of the* first missionaries of the following year, 1626, ratifies the pastoral purpose to which the first four companions commit themselves: life and missionary work in common under the authority of Vincent de Paul. This document announces the subsequent drafting of a set of rules to which they would all be bound.

The pleas that Vincent de Paul made to Pope Urban VIII in the years 1628-1632 and which culminated in the bull "*Salvatoris Nostri*" on 12 January 1633, help Vincent and his companions to concretise the constitutive aspects of their way of life.

In 1635 Vincent de Paul became seriously ill. Louis Abelly has told us that Vincent went so far as to say that the greatest regret he would have had, if he had died then, would have been not to have drawn up the definitive text of the Common Rules (I, 317). For beyond the little rules for organising the day or for a particular ministry, the only reference for the missionaries was, for the time being, the authority and the will of Vincent de Paul.

The first General Assembly of the Congregation, held in 1642, studied at length the proposal for the Common Rules presented by Vincent de Paul. The text, although Vincent could have prepared it personally because of his authority, was already a text revised by a number of missionaries. In the Assembly, all took on the responsibility of arguing, proposing modifications and adding new indications. The Assembly concluded by appointing a commission to draw up the text of the Common Rules which would have to be studied again at the following Assembly.

The drafting of the text, with the participation of the missionaries and the involvement of Vincent de Paul, coincided in time with the negotiations (in Paris and in Rome) for the approbation of the Congregation. We know today that there were, therefore, different drafts of the Rules before their final approval and recognition.

Vincent de Paul did not want to act in haste. According to his usual way of proceeding, he did not want to get ahead of Providence. He had also known some companies which had encountered difficulties because of a premature publication of their Rules. On the other hand, the Rules of the missionaries spoke of the Daughters of Charity, who had not yet been formally recognised.

The text of the Common Rules was approved at the General Assembly of 1651. The thirteen members of the assembly affirmed that these Rules were "in conformity with our way of life and with the purpose and nature of our Congregation". The Assembly delegated to a small commission the power to make the necessary corrections before their publication, for "it happens with the rules as with hands, that the more they are washed, the more they find to wash, or as with hens, that they always find something to peck at where they have passed a hundred times".

We can say that the life of the first missionaries suggested new ideas or nuanced them. And so the Common Rules crystallised after years of shared experience. As Fr Coste says, "Experience is the school of men of action and St Vincent subjected all his works to the test of time, modifying them, correcting them, adapting them according to the lessons he received"[[1]](#footnote-1) .

The Archbishop of Paris approved the Common Rules on 23 August 1653, by the power granted to him by the Bull *Salvatoris Nostri* to approve the statutes and ordinances of the Congregation of the Mission.

The first printing of the Common Rules dates from 1655. This edition contained so many errata, in the opinion of Vincent de Paul, that he had all the copies destroyed and a new edition prepared.

The new printing of the Common Rules was given by Vincent de Paul to the missionaries on 17 May 1658. We know the story well and we are surely still moved by the sight of the missionaries parading to receive the book of the Rules and kissing it devoutly, at the same time as they kissed the hand of Father Vincent. Kneeling down, Fr Almerás asked Vincent to bless the whole community, who knelt with him. Vincent also, kneeling, asked the Lord's blessing for the Rules and, for the missionaries, the grace to observe them faithfully until death.

We can affirm that, with the delivery of the Common Rules to the missionaries, Vincent de Paul completed one of his principal works. Despite his advanced age, he was able to comment on some of the articles (the last conference devoted to the explanation of the Rules is that of 19 December 1659).

But still on 15 July 1659, Vincent de Paul wrote to Cardinal de Retz asking him to approve some modifications he had made to the text of the Rules: "Either because of some faults which have crept into the writing, or because we had ordered things which experience has shown us to be difficult in practice. Be that as it may, Cardinal, we have not touched anything of substance in the rules, nor any detail of importance, to which I testify to Your Eminence before God..." (SVP VIII, 27).

**2.- Vincent de Paul's purpose in drawing up the Common Rules**

The long process of elaboration on the Common Rules allows us to appreciate the interest that Vincent de Paul took in ensuring that the final draft was in conformity with the will of God and with the intuitions that the Holy Spirit awakened in his own life and in the life of the first missionaries.

The process of drawing up the Common Rules clearly shows us the participation of the missionaries, whether in the two General Assemblies which studied them, or in the various commissions in which they took part, or with their personal contributions over the years. But no one doubts that it is Vincent de Paul who is the true author of the Common Rules, because he encouraged reflection and invited participation, because he read and reread them, attentive to the Word of God, especially the Gospels and other writings of the New Testament, because he explained the meaning of the expressions used, because he gathered his own experience from the long life which God gave him.

It is to Vincent de Paul that we owe, of course, the decision to order the various elements that make up the Common Rules, the general structure and organisation of the various chapters, the choice not to include in these Rules elements relating to governance or to the process of admission of members...

In the Common Rules, Vincent de Paul wished to give expression to what Father Corera calls "the manual of the life and spirit of the Vincentian missionary community". The other matters, which traditionally appear in the Constitutions of different communities, form part of the various regulations and, after the death of the founder, in the so-called "*Constitutiones selectae*", approved by Pope Clement X in 1670.

Did Vincent de Paul, in drawing up the Common Rules, make use of the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus? This is suggested by Fr Coste, who affirms that certain rules on correspondence, the practice of silence and even the expression "*this least Society*" come from the Constitutions of St Ignatius of Loyola. A more attentive study, however, shows that a good number of disciplinary indications in the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and in the Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission belong to a long tradition present in the Church and in various communities since the first rules in the history of the Church. It does not seem right, therefore, to affirm the dependence of the Common Rules on the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus; moreover, in many respects Vincent de Paul claims to distance himself expressly from the approaches contained in the Jesuit Constitutions.

Although it is well known, I recall the **structure** of the Common Rules:

1. In the **foreword**, Vincent explains why it has taken him so long to promulgate them, following the practice of Jesus Christ himself, who first practised what he later taught. By containing what the Congregation is already living, the missionaries will have no difficulty in living the contents of the Common Rules.
2. The **twelve chapters** follow a similar pattern: first of all, they invite us to contemplate the practice of Jesus; then they offer a series of indications for the missionary's conduct.
3. **Chapter II**, however, because it deals with the Gospel teachings, does not limit itself at the outset to proposing the practice of Jesus, but does so by introducing each of the Gospel teachings that Vincent de Paul has selected as most suitable for missionaries.
4. What gives unity to all the chapters of the Common Rules is the **reference to Jesus Christ**, for, as Vincent de Paul affirms, they intend that "those who are called to continue the mission of Christ... should be filled with the sentiments and affections of Christ himself, with his spirit, always following in his divine footsteps".

In the study of the Common Rules we can discover his **most original** and therefore most Vincentian **intuitions**. We can highlight the following:

* In their very general approach, the Common Rules present a new way of life, the life of missionaries, a missionary community with its own spirit, and the ascetical-mystical indications which suit its missionary members.
* The Rules proposed by Vincent de Paul are COMMON, that is to say, for all the members of the Congregation, so that there are no different grades in the community (which was the norm in so many communities), but all (clerics and laity) participate in the same call and are destined for the same mission.
* They are the result, as Fr. Vincent expressly indicates, of what the Congregation has been living since its foundation. They refer to the style of life, as well as to the spirit that animates the community and each of the missionaries, and to their pastoral activity.
* They propose to missionaries, who want to follow Jesus Christ and continue his same mission of evangelising the poor on earth, to practice the same attitudes, dispositions and actions of Jesus.
* They try to describe the being and doing of the missionaries, so that those who come from different places and sensibilities can live the same spirit and the same way of life in the early days of the Society and (so Vincent imagines) in the future.
* Although we find in the Common Rules many indications of a disciplinary nature, which aim to maintain order in a community that must move continuously, we do not find any indications of a coercive nature, much less of a penal nature (which do have their place in the Rules of other communities).
* Vincent de Paul did not want to give the Common Rules a juridical character. The juridical elements are to be found in other documents: contract of foundation, act of association, pontifical approval of the Congregation, approvals of the vows, regulations of the various offices...). The Common Rules are, rather, a dynamic manual of missionary life and spirit.
* The pastoral perspective in following Jesus Christ, evangeliser of the poor, permeates each of the articles of the Common Rules. On more than 60 occasions they mention Jesus Christ and his equivalents Lord, Saviour. They condense the vision and experience of Jesus Christ which Vincent de Paul wishes to inspire each missionary.

**II.- THE REVITALISATION OF OUR MISSIONARY IDENTITY**

The Common Rules, like every human achievement, are subject to the laws of the changes of history, the signs of the times, the calls of the Church, the principles of creative fidelity and the updating of the charism.

The Second Vatican Council, in promoting the renewal of all forms of life in the Church in order to find anew in the sources the inspiring principles of the following of Jesus Christ, encouraged the drawing up of new Constitutions (the 1954 Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission had been drawn up in response to the orientations of the 1917 Code of Canon Law).

The Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission, drawn up by the General Assembly of 1980 (after the Extraordinary Assembly of 1968-1969 and the Assembly of 1974, which worked conscientiously on the texts) and promulgated in 1984 with the approval of the Holy See, state that "*the present Constitutions, Statutes and Decrees constitute the proper law of the Congregation currently in force*".

However, the Constitutions and Statutes themselves point out that the spirit of Christ, with which the Congregation must be filled in order to achieve its purpose, shines forth above all in the evangelical teachings as explained in the Common Rules (C. 4). On other occasions, the Constitutions also refer to the spirit of the Founder (C. 34), which is also found in the Common Rules.

For its part, the Congregation affirmed in 1954 that "all missionaries should have a great esteem and veneration for the Common Rules bequeathed to us by our Father St. Vincent, since they constitute the code of perfection proper to our Congregation".

And our Superior General has invited us to read and pray the Common Rules in all the time of our life, cherishing towards them the same sentiments of cordial respect and strenuous fidelity that St. Vincent himself recommended (cf. RC XII, 13).

**How can the Common Rules contribute today to revitalising our missionary identity?**

1.- The Common Rules have forged the missionary personality of the Congregation since its foundation. If St. Vincent emphasised that the Rules were being observed even before they were written, we can also affirm today that they live on in the fidelity of the missionaries who bring the spirit of the Founder up to date. Let us therefore give thanks to God for the values which St Vincent de Paul succeeded in expressing in the Common Rules and let us adhere to them wholeheartedly.

2.- St. Vincent de Paul told us that the Common Rules are the fruit of the divine spirit and not of the human spirit; that they are based on the life, works and spirit of Christ "as far as we were able to do so" (X, 462), in formulating them in writing.

Because Christ is the "rule" of the Mission (XI, 429) and because all revitalisation must start, always start, from Christ (cf. Instruction Re-partire da Cristo), the Common Rules sustain this reference to Jesus Christ at all times. St. Vincent assures us that they come from God and are drawn from the Gospel (IX, 293-294, 727; XI, 323), that they lead to God like the ship to the port (VII, 133-135), that they are paths which lead missionaries to their goal and help them to persevere in their vocation (IX, 56-57; XI, 775-776).

The vocation of the missionary requires contemplating Christ, evangeliser of the poor, who has gathered a community of apostles to continue his mission. Knowing, contemplating and practising what Jesus practised and taught is the permanent dynamism of the discipleship to which we missionaries are invited.

Because the Common Rules have these values, the Provinces, as did the Assemblies which drew up the Constitutions, must promote a prayerful reading of the text and a creatively faithful updating. In this sense, the commitment made by the participants of CEVIM at the last Assembly should be encouraged in the communities and among the missionaries.

3.- St. Vincent succeeded in engraving the foundations of his spirituality in the mysteries of the Trinity, the Incarnation and the Eucharist, sustained in the events of daily life, in the Family of Nazareth in which the Incarnate Word wanted to live obediently, under the attentive gaze of Mary, the mother of Jesus. It is appropriate that, in the Internal Seminary, we note and explain in detail the engraving which appears in the princely edition of the Common Rules (1658). This engraving which Vincent de Paul wanted to appear on the first page of the Common Rules opens us, through contemplation, to enter into the Vincentian spiritual experience.

4.- St. Vincent made it clear that the Common Rules were not binding under sin. Today the Common Rules are not even a normative body with juridical value. Therefore, let us approach the Common Rules as one of the best means God has given to missionaries to advance along the path of charity and to persevere in their vocation.

5.- All the chapters of the Common Rules presuppose the existence of a community of spiritual and apostolic men.

That is why we find few ascetical norms in the Common Rules. St. Vincent was convinced that, if the missionary is committed to following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, he will bring forth from within himself the most suitable means for living asceticism and the manifestations of his piety.

The disciplinary norms, usual in his time, which Vincent took from the Christian tradition, are necessary for an orderly, healthy, just and pious life (cf. Titus 1, 12-13); not as they are formulated in the Common Rules, but in accordance with the practices of Christians today in the different cultures. Today it is up to the Provinces and communities to agree on the principles of respect for the dignity of persons, of participation and of living together.

6.- The Common Rules do not contain the totality of the spiritual experience of St. Vincent de Paul, nor even of what he wished to communicate to the missionaries so that they might live their vocation to the full. For example, they say very little about the prayer life of the missionary or about the ministry of priests; they do not mention the vows.

In the Common Rules we find the description of the spirit of the missionary who wants to live in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, evangeliser of the poor, as Vincent de Paul understood it. But many other aspects of his spiritual experience can only be found in the letters, conferences and documents which, thank God, have been preserved for us from St. Vincent de Paul.

This requires us to promote in our Provinces and in the Congregation a programme of Vincentian studies which, starting from the sources, allows us to update our heritage and make it meaningful today, because the best service we can render to the Church and to the poor is the authenticity of our missionary identity, to be what we are according to the Vincentian project inspired by God and approved by the Church.

Corpus Juan Delgado, c.m.

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1. COSTE, P., *El Señor Vicente, el gran santo del gran siglo*, CEME, Salamanca, t. II. p. 7: Coste quotes from Abelly, Luis, *La vie du vénérable serviteur de Dieu Vincent de Paul,* 3 vol. I, p. 252. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)