Revitalizing the CM’s identity in the evangelization of the poor and the formation of clergy and laity

Jesus Christ gathered around him men without any missionary training. None of them was a rabbi, prepared to teach in a Hebrew school, and none of them had graduated from a Greek school of rhetoric. Most of them were fishermen; one was a tax collector. This was the human type that the Prophet of Nazareth chose to form the community of disciples. He himself was a Teacher for them and his teaching formed them. Christ himself taught them the art of mission.

Jesus organized the teaching with precision. When the disciples left for their missions they had been well formed by the Master’s teachings, received precise instructions on where to go and how they should behave in various situations. At the end of the mission, they would return to Christ and give him a detailed account of what they had done. The disciples were held accountable for the tasks assigned to them.

Jesus preached the Good News always and everywhere. He did not distinguish between official and private preaching, between sermons to crowds, which could number as many as a few thousand people, and individual preaching, such as the nighttime conversation with Nicodemus or the brief midday exchange with the Samaritan woman at the well. His every word, his every gesture, every event that featured him became a transmission of the Good News. His presence was the proclamation of the Gospel. He himself was the Good News.

A second important characteristic of Jesus’ missionary teaching is his ability to use any situation to preach the Good News. The Master of Nazareth teaches in any context: at home, in the synagogue, outdoors, in the temple, at the pool of Siloam, from a boat. He teaches at night, at dawn, and at dusk. He teaches in the storm, on the road, sitting at table, before a court as a defendant, and hanging on a cross. In Christ’s missionary workshop, every situation in which the missionary finds himself is good for the transmission of the Gospel.

It is quite limiting and ambiguous to enclose the preaching of the Gospel to the exclusive moment of the homily from the pulpit. The risk is to make the Gospel a theory with no connection to concrete life. The Gospel, rather, is the Good News of life—the common, ordinary life—of every human being. In the school of Christ, the missionary must master the art of reaching every human being with the Good News.

Jesus communicates the Good News on two levels: one we can call the scholastic level, while the other is related to the speeches He gives to the crowds. The so-called scholastic level includes the instructions addressed to the disciples. Sometimes He uses this term to refer to His chosen apostles and His missionary group of 72 people, at other times to refer to all those who wish to follow Him.

At the second level should be placed the discourses to the crowds, in which Jesus, through a parable, tells about the Kingdom of God. Gospel truth is hidden in the parable behind a beautiful robe that focuses attention and is able to captivate listeners.

The dialogues in which Jesus communicates the truths of the Gospel are an interesting form of preaching. They always take place in a well-defined situation. Many of them are apologetic in nature. The art of discussion was one of the important factors in his missionary successes.

The disciples of Jesus of Nazareth, called “Christians” by the Roman administration or by the people of Antioch (Acts 11:26), in an effort to add men and women to the early community of disciples of the Nazarene recounted the things Jesus said and did by the means of communication then available to them: taking the floor in the synagogues of the Jews or under the arcades of the cities, using ethnic and family meeting opportunities.

On the day of Pentecost, after the descent of the Holy Spirit, Peter directs a missionary address to the crowd that had gathered. The head of the apostolic college briefly expounded the Christian proclamation, exhorting the listening people to conversion. “Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand persons were added that day. They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers” (Acts 2:41-42). Such “teaching of the apostles” covers both the preparation for baptism and the post-baptismal period. There are qualified and designated persons to teach: the apostles and immediately along with them the teachers, and later the bishops and others. From the very beginning, a block of doctrines is formed to teach and accept in order to enter the church and that constitutes something essential to be handed down: “Now I am reminding you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you indeed received and in which you also stand. Through it you are also being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you, unless you believed in vain” (l Corinthians 15:1-2).

Christianity quickly emerged from Palestine and began to spread throughout the world. Jesus’ disciples, on their missionary journeys, began by proclaiming the kerygma in synagogues, finding in the Jewish community a natural place to begin missionary activity, after all, they were Jews, but they were not limited to them. As we know from the New Testament, especially from Paul’s letters, others also joined the early communities.

The Gospel also began to reach communities other than the Jewish community, such as the Greek community, which came from a completely different religious experience than the Jewish one, and which started from radically different questions. They had never heard of the Messiah, neither expected nor feared his coming, were not interested in the Jewish Law and did not know God’s commandments. They were pious, even superstitious, believing fatalistically in deities who could bestow various gifts on people but who could also unleash misfortune on them; therefore, they participated in the offering of thanksgiving and supplication sacrifices believing that the fate not only of individuals but also of entire communities depended on it. When they saw someone deviating from these offerings they considered him a public enemy, an anarchist who wanted to destroy the state. They also did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, thinking that the immortality of the soul was entirely sufficient for happiness. After death, purification from all evil will be necessary, but there is hope of a happy eternity for the soul. Paul, in his missionary outreach in the Athenian Areopagus, was heard until he began to speak of the resurrection. On hearing about resurrection from the dead, he obtained only derision from those who were listening to him (Acts 17:16-34). Some, however, became interested and believed, and even their names were recorded: Dionysius and a certain Damaris.

Saint Vincent, too, often refers in his teaching to the missionary activity of Christ and the early apostolic communities. The current that runs through all of Vincent de Paul’s spirituality is the mystery of the Son of God sent and made flesh to be “*the Father’s missionary*.” “*The Son of God came to evangelize the poor. And are not we, Messieurs, sent for the same purpose? Yes, Missioners are sent to evangelize the poor. Oh, what a happiness to do on earth the same thing Our Lord did there…!*” This Christ incarnated to evangelize the poor is “*the rule of mission*.” “*Our Lord Jesus Christ is the true model and that great invisible portrait on whom we must fashion all our actions*.”

For us, the spirit is nothing other than the action of the Holy Spirit operating in Saint Vincent and inspiring him to follow Christ in a new way. It is this very Spirit who has called us to follow the same path. For our founder, the five specific virtues, which he recommends that we practice in a special way, are proper elements of the “spirit” of the Congregation of the Mission. The “end” is to continue the mission of Christ as the evangelizer of the poor; the “works” or ministries are means through which it is possible to incarnate the spirit and achieve the end of the institute. The spirit and the end remain, the works change, according to the needs of the world, the Church, and the poor.

Saint Vincent noticed, among the poor people, a frightening ignorance of the truths of the faith; he was haunted by it as if by a nightmare: “When I’d come back from giving a mission, it seemed to me that, when I reached Paris, the gates of the city were going to fall upon and crush me.” This is the reason for the organization of the missions, whose first purpose is to bring the faithful back to the practice of the sacraments, and which developed, very soon, into a real evangelizing action of children and adults, through preaching and catechism. Here, too, the originality and modernity of Vincent de Paul’s work is revealed.

All historians agree that Vincent de Paul played a central role in reforming the way of preaching of his time. It is also significant, and no doubt providential, that his work took place in two preaching sessions, Folleville and Châtillon, not to mention his discourses to the Ladies. From then on, Saint Vincent worked to move the Church from “sacred eloquence” to “missionary preaching”; he proposed a method that, according to its very author, inspired most preachers of his time.

Vincent, who had tasted the simplicity and effectiveness of preaching according to this little method, on more than one occasion analyzes it and tries to establish its laws, to make this method of preaching accessible to all, to touch hearts and bring them to conversion. Above all, this requires humility, “the virtue missionaries need most” to be conformed to Our Lord. “… To speak of things that are lofty and exalted, … only ruins things instead of giving edification.” Then we must be rooted in simplicity, speaking the language of daily life, without stylistic effects, without learned comparisons or literary digressions, we must “preach mainly by good example, good example, being faithful to regulations and living as good Missioners, for otherwise, Messieurs, we do nothing, we do nothing … How can someone who’s careless himself, not obeying any regulations and living as a free spirit, help others to turn away from this? That’s a travesty. People will say to him, *Medice, cura te ipsum*. So, that’s clear; nothing is more obvious.” “Let’s be careful of that, my dear confreres! Those of you who give missions and you who speak in public, watch out!”

Preaching must first and foremost be a call to conversion. To do this, there is only one way: proclaim the Gospel: “When the Company is working in the missions, it must give itself to God to explain by familiar comparisons the truths of the Gospel…. Let’s be judicious about using passages from profane authors in our preaching.” Again, “Don’t be afraid to proclaim Christian truths to the people in the simplicity of the gospel and the early church workers.”

However, it is up to the preacher to ensure that the Word of God encounters people’s concrete lives, and to do this, Saint Vincent outlines the stages of good preaching: explain clearly the nature of the subject matter about which one intends to speak, then the reasons given, and finally the means proposed for its implementation.

Vincent frankly admitted that the formation of the clergy was not at the forefront of his thoughts when he founded the Congregation of the Mission. Vincent’s thinking on this issue evolved slowly. In fact, the earliest founding documents of the Congregation of the Mission make no mention of initiatives or projects regarding formation of the clergy. During a trip in July 1628, after a conversation with Vincent, the Bishop of Beauvais, Augustin Potier, decided to receive ordinands in his house in September to prepare them better for priestly ministry.

Was this Vincent’s first initiative for the formation of clergy? Much earlier, during his parish work in Clichy, Vincent had gathered around him a group of ten or twelve young men who were thinking about the priesthood, among them was Antoine Portail, then 20 years old. Our Founder concluded that in order to care for the formation of the clergy, it was necessary to establish a community dedicated to their human and spiritual growth. How did he come up with this idea? A year earlier, on 11 November 1611, Pierre de Bérulle had gathered a group of five priests to live in community while remaining diocesan priests. Perhaps because of Pierre de Bérulle's authoritarian nature and the style the community had taken, Father Adrian Bourdoise left it to found a similar community with other clergymen, first in the parish of Saint-Christophe and then in that of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet. In the following years, Saint Vincent often collaborated with this community.

In 1632, documents began to mention, consistently, retreats for ordinands. In Paris, the Congregation was obliged to receive all candidates for ordination that the Diocese of Paris sent to the House of Saint Lazare and had to provide for their room and board for a period of two weeks before ordination. “*Salvatoris nostri*” (1633), the Bull erecting the Congregation, explicitly mentions an organized retreat for those preparing for ordination.

As the number of seminaries grew, Vincent became increasingly interested in what we now call the formation of formators. The saint’s desire was that every member of the Congregation be well prepared, both for their work in the missions and for formation work in the seminaries. Vincent was well aware that this was an ideal situation that was difficult to achieve.

Beginning in 1633, Vincent began gathering a select group of diocesan priests interested in their own ongoing formation. The conferences attracted zealous priests, many of whom became influential Church leaders in France. Vincent, as presider, carefully selected the participants. The organization provided weekly meetings with members meeting, usually on Tuesdays, at Saint Lazare. The group’s structure offered opportunities for development, mutual support, and cooperation. Admission to the group was not easy; only those who led exemplary lives were, in fact, accepted. Over the years, the conferences also led members to an active apostolic life: teaching catechism to children, evangelizing and instructing the poor, spiritual care in hospitals, and popular missions. Although most members did not intend to become missionaries, the conferences emphasized the virtues that Vincent believed all missionaries should possess, particularly simplicity and humility. The question may arise: should we not, today, benefit from these early experiences we have just recalled?

By the mid-18th century both Vincentian families were in great decline: discipline was respected but the charism was not lived out. Hence, the serious crisis at the time of the French Revolution. Father Jean-Baptiste Étienne’s action was decisive. He took it upon himself to reawaken missionary ardor in the two Vincentian families. The times demanded courageous choices from superiors, and Father Étienne knew how to give a strong response by renewing the Communities under the sign of the original charism. By setting courageous goals (and missionary openness was very important), he succeeded in provoking a profound renewal in prayer. Beginning in the 19th century, the Daughters of Charity increased dramatically in number. The vocation allowed them to leave the country, to study, to travel. Then, as often happens, fear took over. The lack of personality and character of the consecrated persons led to a backsliding, the charism was reduced to a repetitive rendition of a proven score, and fear took over and prevailed over the action of the Spirit.

If we wanted to describe the reality and society in which we live today, we could use the label “post-Christian” (I prefer it to “non-Christian” or “anti-Christian”). The ambiguous nature of secularized and secularizing culture is generating enormous intellectual and moral confusion. The speed and scale with which this phenomenon is rampant are, often, downplayed. In this confusion, the discussion of what is good, bad, and indifferent is more necessary than ever. In the ruins of Christian civilization, it is exceptionally difficult to distinguish content from ornament, blasphemy from bad taste, a custom worth saving from one that can be ignored.

If the Titanic is sinking, it is time to reflect on what attitude to take toward a Christian civilization in crisis, and thus also to reflect on what missionary attitude to take in a time of strong secularization. Some opinions already are taking shape clearly and some extreme attitudes are now evident. Some, encouraging the orchestra to greater vigor, are inclined to defend every embellishment. They swear in spirit that, even if it is true that the Christian ship is sinking (which they do not quite believe), they will be the last to go down. Others, on the contrary, see in this situation an opportunity for rebirth. After all, Christianity and Christian civilization are not the same thing. Let the old decorations burn, let privileges finally disappear, let worldly ambitions be forgotten, and let pure Christianity, free from the uncomfortable habit of customs and traditions, finally appear before our eyes. What to do? Play in the orchestra or act by hastening and facilitating the sinking of the ship?

Our fear of the unknown, of course, is no surprise, especially when the fall threatens to destroy so many and such important achievements. It is hard to console ourselves every day with the thought that civilizations come and go. It is natural to identify them with the world. Saint Jerome said, *if Rome can fall, what is left for sure*? Do we not think the same?

It is therefore possible to make our own the attitude that, with all the disadvantages this situation brings, it is appropriate to regard it as a blessing. Thus we should focus on what is important to us, accepting that it is as ineffective as it is useless to fight over secondary issues. After all, the Church will not disappear with the disappearance of civilization. We defend what is important without using Christ’s authority to extol the virtues of issues that are secondary to Revelation. The Church survived because, instead of dying to the empire, it began to evangelize the barbarians. The condition for dialogue with people outside the Church, the condition for evangelization today, is the ability to initiate fruitful dialogue.

Conversely, however, an illusion—a dangerous illusion—is the so-called pure Christianity, always desired by those who willingly open doors to barbarians. The nature of human cognition is such that, with the exception of mystics, we come to know God indirectly, and so for most of us the condition for knowing the Word is that He is incarnate. The divine and the holy are revealed to us through the sensual. The God who reveals himself to our eyes takes a concrete form: The Word became flesh, and this also means that his Truth became incarnate in a particular language, culture, and time. There is no Christianity without people, and people always speak a language, live in a time, belong to a culture. As long as we live in the flesh, there is no room for a pure Christianity that hides only a naivety of thought, or is the disguised expression of a desire to express God’s truths in the language of a new or simply different culture.

Moreover, is it really necessary to hasten the death of something that is still bearing spiritual fruit? We must not underestimate custom. It is easy to fall into a vacuum by saying that we must be faithful to the content, not the decoration, to the Word, not the way of expressing it. But let us remember that many of us arrive at the content precisely through this passing ornamentation. Therefore, let us stop casting fire to separate the seemingly secondary and transitory things from the more important ones. When the fire goes out, we may find, unfortunately, that, in our zeal, we have burned the only bridge leading to the other shore. Custom is a bit like the piece of paper on which we have written our faith. Destroying it may destroy more than just the form of writing. If we make sacrifices on secondary issues, will we not end up making sacrifices on important issues as well?

Finally, the question of dialogue and evangelization. Who, given a choice between discussing the most important issues with a wise expert and a little boy, would choose the latter? After all, Christian civilization is not just a burden, but a great treasure of wisdom and beauty. When we evangelize, we need to find a common language with the modern world, but why should we not enrich it with the past—a culture that expands our experience with that of generations of Christians? Let us remember that there is no certainty that the Titanic will sink, despite what the experts on all the world’s television stations think.

Christians will always regard their revelation as universal and God as the only Creator, Lord, and Savior. This is why the Church has a message addressed to the whole world and not to members of an elite. Therefore, in principle, there is no alternative to building a Christian civilization—any possible controversy only can be about what its architecture will be, with whom we will build, and how much of the old building will be used to construct the next. After all, it is clearly written: the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

What we especially need at this time in history are people who, through an enlightened and lived faith, make God credible in this world. The negative witness of Christians talking about God and living against Him has obscured the image of God and opened the door to unbelief. We need people who keep their eyes on God, learning true humanity from Him. We need people whose intellect is illuminated by the light of God and who allow their hearts to be opened, so that their intellect can speak to the intellect of others and their hearts can open the hearts of others. Only through people who are touched by God do we open the way that leads Him to people.

Particularly in Europe, a culture has developed that, in a way previously unknown to humanity, excludes God from public consciousness, whether he is denied altogether or his existence is judged to be unprovable, uncertain, and therefore belonging to the realm of subjective choices, a presence in any case irrelevant to public life.

Unfortunately, the prevailing climate of profound defensiveness does not serve to discuss what we propose to the world. Instead of focusing on survival strategies, we need to finally think about goals. It must be admitted that the vision of goals is highly imprecise. Agreeing that we do not want to return to the era of the Church’s political power does not mean, unfortunately, that we are clear about what to do. A convincing critique of the defects of the old model of Christian civilization is not accompanied by a convincing proposal to the question: how to Christianize the world without repeating the mistakes of the past? The fact that the Church, made wiser by the experience of the centuries, does not intend to exercise political power, does not mean after all that it will not try to Christianize politics. The same applies to matters of culture and economics. Evangelization of these areas is an obvious goal for Christians. However, do we really know what Christianization means for the world today? Do we know what it will be like if it re-embraces the Christian message? Will it be similar to what it is today? What will change in it? These are questions to which I see no easy answers.