

Provincial Treasurers

*Julio Suescun Olcoz, c.m.
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Foreword

A three-point summary that may be useful for this meeting:

How to evaluate the Treasurer's office.

Today's sources for the acquisition of goods.

The Vincentian principles of a right administration

In the recension published in *Vincentiana* of the Meeting of Provincial Treasurers held in Rome in 2002, I found two interventions which I thought most interesting, those of Fr. Maloney and Fr. Lamblin, There were several other interventions that I found also of interest, but they do not really belong with the topic I am dealing with at this moment.

Now I only want to emphasize the idea that while the Treasurer's office should be carried out with all the possible technical competence, we should never forget to be faithful to the true Vincentian principles in this matter.

1. How to evaluate the Provincial Treasurer's office

For a fundamental text to evaluate the Treasurer's office at any level in the Congregation of the Mission: see **Text #1**.

Saint Vincent thinks that material goods are necessary for the Mission, that they are God's gifts to be administered by the Congregation in a responsible manner to carry out its mission, and that there should be men in charge of the work of administration so that the other members could have a more intense dedication to the work of the evangelization free of any charge to the poor.

1.1. The need of possessing goods so as to carry out a missionary work free of charge:

We know that new communities were not founded unless a sufficiently solid economic base was provided for. Saint Vincent's thinking and practice in this matter are quite clear (see **Text #2**).

The sources of revenues for the foundations were of many types. Through them God's Providence is manifested in our favour, and so it is not improper that we accept what is given to us in His name. He says to Fr. La Salle: (see **Text #3**)

He is strongly opposed to the idea that the inhabitants of the place where the mission is given should pay for the running expenses of the missionaries. Such a practice would be the end of the gratuitousness of our missions, for we are as obliged to give our missions free of charge as are the capuchins to live on alms (see **Text #4**)

1.2. Goods are to be administered in order to carry out our Mission:

The only legitimating reason for us to possess material goods is no other than that of enabling us to work for God's glory. Material goods should be dedicated to the service of Charity. If charity requires that we have goods, have we must. What really matters is that we use them according to the requirements of charity, even to their being exhausted, if need be, for that purpose (see **Text #1**).

Saint Vincent thinks that the goods of the community belong to the poor, and that the missionaries can use them only to carry out their work for the poor, and not to maintain a comfortable life style (see **Text #6**)

The possession of goods is legitimated only by its relation to work. Idleness would therefore be an injustice towards the poor, for it would entail that we use in our favor goods that God has entrusted to us for their good. If we work for God's interests, He will take care of our interests; we will live with fear of dying by a cemetery's wall only if we lack trust in God's Providence, who feeds the birds of the sky and dresses the lilies of the field (see **Text #1**)

1.2. It is necessary that some missionaries be charged with the administration of material goods:

Two motives are readily shown to substantiate this idea: Jesus' life with his apostles and the example of other communities (see **Text #8**)

This motive is worded thus in the Common Rules: see **Text #9**

In fidelity to these ideas of Saint Vincent the Constitutions state that "*The Congregation of the Mission embraces a communitarian form of evangelical poverty in that all goods of the Congregation are held in common, and the Congregation uses them to pursue and attain its own purpose more successfully*" Const. CM. 148, § 2).

We might perhaps remark that, from the point of view of a real fidelity to the spirit of Saint Vincent, it would be hardly legitimate to maintain a happy-go-lucky lack of interest for earthly goods under the consideration that God the Father feeds the birds of the sky and dresses the lilies of the field. Saint Vincent writes to Fr. Dehorgny, superior of the community in Rome: see **Text #10**.

Let us then keep in mind now the need to endow the community with a material base as solid as possible, leaving for the moment aside the point, to be seen presently, as to the origin or sources of that material base. Let us keep in mind also that a careful administration of the community goods is a trait that belongs directly and immediately in our fidelity to the spirit of the Congregation.

2. The modern sources of the acquisition of goods.

Another text of Saint Vincent's might help us to understand something that in his own times could hardly be more than a wish or something to dream about, and yet today has become a strict necessity and a normal state of things in our lives (see **Text #11**).

While commenting on the work of the Daughters of Charity as a source of goods for their upkeep, and even as a means to help the poor, he expresses his desire that the situation would be the same for his missionaries, but he realizes its impossibility in the given historical conditions. (see **Text #12**)

Many of the sources on which Saint Vincent established the economic solidity of his communities have today dried up. Some of those sources, such as many types of rents, would even be seen today as a counter-testimony in the lives of missionaries who profess to live in nearness to the poor. In today's world, only the very rich can afford to live on revenues proceeding from rents and not from their work.

The Constitutions speak about this problem in this somewhat vague manner: *The sources of temporal goods are the work of the members and other legitimate means of acquiring goods.* (Const. CM. 150, § 2).

Fr. Jaime Corera c.m., in trying to characterize the economic bases on which our communities, in fidelity to St. Vincent, should be established today, makes a distinction between what he terms as

St. Vincent's "ideology" in regard to the economic base of the community, and the concrete financing techniques he made use of by reason of the historical social circumstances of his time. He concludes by saying that "*while in his time it was unavoidable to assure the necessities of life through quasi-feudal means of appropriation, imitating him today literally would imply the search for a totally risk-free economic security that would go against the fundamental evangelical vocation of the Congregation*" (J. Corera, *Diez Estudios Vicencianos*, CEME Salamanca, 1983, p. 156).

This is also from the Constitutions: "*Whatever is needed for the support and growth of members and for carrying out our work, should come principally from the joint effort of all*" (Const. CM. 33). As Fr. Pérez Flores remarks (M. Pérez Flores, *Revestirse del espíritu de Cristo*, CEME Salamanca 1996, p. 354), this norm does not exclude other sources of revenue, but certainly it points out the fundamental orientation whereby the Congregation wants to be inspired in regard to the sources of its economic structure. .

3. Vincentian principles to regulate the administration of goods

3.3.1. Administration, not dominion.

The goods of the community are to be administered by the respective treasurers under the direction and vigilance of superiors with their councils, within the limits of universal law and our own law, and according to the principle of subsidiarity. (Const. CM. 153, § 2).

This article enumerates three elements of a good Vincentian administration: the superior's careful supervision, the universal and the particular law that set modes of proceeding that the treasurer cannot alter, and subsidiarity, a principle that tries to safeguard the administrator's personal dignity.

3.3.2. A careful administration:

Administrators should remember that they are only stewards of the goods of the Community. (Const. CM. 154, § 1).

From this principle the Constitutions draw five conclusions:

a) *Consequently, they should expend these goods only for uses suitable to the status of missionaries. Moreover, they should always act according to just civil laws, as well as according to the norms and spirit of the Congregation. (Const. CM. ib).*

The treasurer administers the community goods and uses them in accordance with the nature of a community of friends who love one another, keeping in mind:

An appropriate missionary life style

Acting always according to just legislation

The spirit of the Congregation places a strong emphasis once and again on a simple way of life, on a sober and even austere life style worthy of men who confess to be followers of a Christ who lived the life of the poor (Const. CM: 31).

b) *Administrators should provide willingly for the needs of members in all matters which concern their life, particular office, and apostolic work. Such a use of goods is an incentive for members to promote the good of the poor and to lead a truly fraternal life. (Const. CM. 154 § 2). (see Text #13)*

c) *These administrators should, in addition, observe equity in the distribution of goods because they ought to promote community life among the members. (Const. CM. 154 § 3).*

d) *They should provide for the individual needs of members according to the norms enacted by the provincial assembly. (Const. CM. ib.).*

e) *For the validity of alienation and any other transaction in which the patrimonial condition of a juridic person can be affected adversely, there is required the written permission of the competent superior with the consent of his council. If, moreover, it concerns a transaction which exceeds the highest amount defined for a given region by the Holy See, or items given to the Church in virtue of a vow, or items of precious art or of historical value, the permission of the Holy See is also required. (Const. CM. 155).*

A good administration cannot overlook the drawing up and the frequent putting up-to-date of the inventory.

3.3.3. An administration based on solidarity:

a) Solidarity among the members of the Congregation:

In the Congregation of the Mission we put in common the material goods which are the fruit of our work, as a visible expression of our spirit of communion, following the example of the early Christians (Const. CM. 32 § 2).

Provinces and houses should share their temporal goods with each other so that those who have more help those in need. (Const.CM. 152).

Within the bounds of equity and with the consent of his council, the superior general has the right to impose a tax on provinces; similarly, with the consent of his council, the provincial has this right with respect to houses of his province. (Est. CM. 101).

b) Solidarity towards the poor:

The Constitutions mention several times the idea of sharing our goods with the poor:

The Congregation, provinces, and houses should, from their own goods, willingly provide for the necessities of others and the support of the indigent. (Const.CM. 152 § 2).

Mention is also made that administrators should provide the missionaries with the *adequate means for their apostolic activities and for charitable works. (Const. CM. 153 § 1).*

Art.33 of the Constitutions states with added incisiveness: *The Congregation, avoiding any accumulation of goods, should try to share its resources with the poor. In this way, freed from the desire of riches, we would witness to a world enamored of materialism. (Const.CM. 33).*

The root of all that resides in the conviction that the Congregation *possesses temporal goods for pastoral and community needs. It uses them as support for the service of God and the poor, according to the spirit and practice of its Founder; it administers these goods, however, as the patrimony of the poor, with solicitude, but with no attempt to grow rich. (Const.CM. 148 § 2).*

c) Solidarity towards the employees in our houses and works:

Since St. Vincent's times the Congregation understands that temporal goods are to be administered *whithout going against justice (SVP.ES.IX,413)*. In addition, in the Statutes of the Congregation we find it written: *Laws regarding work, security, and justice, in favor of persons working in houses and works of the Congregation, should be exactly observed (E. 107).*

3.3.4. A transparent administration:

A transparent administration includes clear accounting, precise and exact, openness and easy accessibility to the superiors for inspection, and information to the other members of the community, as it is established in the norms.

In St. Vincent's mind, the requirement of giving information was not something based on mistrust; and then it was not so much a question of showing the accounting books, but of how things were administered.