NEW EVANGELIZATION AND ST. VINCENT DE PAUL

We will do well to be attentive to this 13th Synod of Bishops, since our purpose in the Church coincides with the content of this next Synod that takes as title *The New Evangelization for the Transmission of Catholic Faith*. The reflections have already been made and those that will still follow up to the writing of a final document can and must serve to deepen, impel and to encourage us in our evangelization of the poor.

I have been asked to reflect on the New Evangelization and St. Vincent. It is a question of applying the Vincentian lens to this topic because surely Vincent can help us understand in a Vincentian way this project of the New Evangelization. Furthermore, though it may sound an anachronism, we can say that Vincent tried to carry out a “New Evangelization” or, more exactly, a re-Evangelization. When he was born, France was a country for the most part Catholic, but which also needed someone who would remind them of the great truths of faith in all its purity and in all its demands. Vincent devoted himself to it soul and body, from 37 years up to his death at the age of 80, and to it he dedicated all the institutions that he founded. Fr. Raymond Chalumeau presents to us the result of his evangelizing determination with this impressive affirmation: "*The Christian re-conversion of France owes, largely, to the efforts of St. Vincent and of the missionaries. One has just to compare the religious situation of France of 1600 to that of 1675. It is for us pleasant and flattering to state that this result has been obtained, in a definite way, by our Blessed Father and by the members of the Congregation that he founded*” (R. CHALUMEAU, *San Vicente de Paúl y las misiones,* en *Vicente de Paúl, evangelizador de los pobres,* CEME 1973, p. 128). The great historian Daniel Rops supports something similar: "*The sociological studies carried out in our days have demonstrated that those zones at which more than 300 years ago the missionaries were employed with more intensity have remained Christian in the France of the 20th century; and those lands where they did not penetrate are the sadly famous, special regions marked red by canon BOULARD in his famous map of the religious practice in the France of our epoch. One cannot render more exact homage to the missions of the 16th and the 17th centuries, and to the admirable men who so correctly directed them*” (D. ROPS, *La Iglesia de los tiempos clásicos. El gran siglo de las almas,* Ed. Luis de Garalt, Barcelona, p. 107).

I have organized this topic in two reflections. In the first moment we will see the common points between Vincent de Paul and the New Evangelization. In the second reflection, as a way of conclusion, we will see towards where the New Evangelization impels the Congregation and the missionaries.

**I. CONFLUENCES BETWEEN VINCENT DE PAUL AND THE NEW EVANGELIZATION**

Vincent de Paul was a charismatic man, with an important action in two very specific fields of the Church in the 17th century: charity and mission. A concrete man, belonging to an epoch quite different from ours in time and in space, in mentality, in culture, in the social, in the religious and in the theological, he would hardly be able to enlighten the problems that now surrounds New Evangelization. Nevertheless, as a charismatic man, who felt very deeply the urgency of Evangelization inside him and which led him to found some institutions, he can contribute something to this urgency of the “New Evangelization”. I think that as missionaries we should ask ourselves, what stresses and what nuances can Vincent give today to the “New Evangelization”, since the Church will never ask us to be disinterested with the spirit that animates us but exactly on the contrary, to contribute to the Church and to the world the richness of our charism, i.e., to evangelize from our charism. We can specify in four the great connections between Vincent and the project of the Church for the New Evangelization.

**1. The catechumenate and the catechesis**

When Vincent repeated, with so much force and preoccupation, that "the poor was being condemned," he was referring to the absence of elementary religious knowledge. In tune with the theology of the time, Vincent was certain that religious ignorance was a cause of condemnation. This worry came out often of his lips (cf. XI, 104, 267, 387). The following text, for example, shows clearly Vincent's mentality. It is a letter directed to Fr. Du Coudray, then in Rome, working for the papal approval of the CM. The year was 1631: *They (the Roman Curia) need to understand that the poor people is condemned for not knowing the things necessary for salvation … If his Holiness knew this need, he would not rest until he has done everything possible to put order in it”* (I, 176-177).

This conviction made Vincent understand that he and his followers had to insist on the catechetical aspect of the missions; this characteristic that has always distinguished the Vincentian missions from the other missionary groups in the Church, which were more centered on the penitential aspect. Fr. Corera underlines this catechetical aspect of our missions “*What the rural village poor, already a believer and practicing in his own way, needed was, above all, a systematic catechesis that would orient him towards the purest orthodoxy and towards an authentic sacramental and charitable ortopraxis.”* (cf. *Nueva evangelización para vicentinos ayer y hoy,* en CLAPVI”, nº 65 (1989) p. 338). Therefore, Vincent used the popular catechesis to re-evangelize the France of his century. It was the whole society that needed to be re-evangelized as stated by the Council of Trent. Nevertheless, Vincent and his missionaries felt urged to evangelize the rural poor. These persons could not be catechized with the high theological language of Trent nor of the theologians who inspired its texts, but with a type of “little method” that put the truths of the faith within the reach of the simplest minds. One had to preach to them "in a missionary way” in the expression of Vincent de Paul (cf. XI, 286).

In tune with this Vincent's contribution, we have to emphasize that in the New Evangelization one gives supreme importance to the catechumenate. Two references suffice: in number 14 of the Lineamenta, which will serve as basis for the dialogues of the next Synod, one speaks very extensively and clearly of the catechesis and the catechumenate. In them it is possible to specify the “pedagogy of faith” of which the Church makes use to transmit the faith in an active and deep way. And if we refer to the Pope John Paul II, the initiator of the New Evangelization, he declared solemnly that “the catechesis was the concrete application and the basic instrument of the New Evangelization” (Speech to the Bishops of Campania, on January 11, 1987).

**2. The “new ardor” as style of the missionary**

Today it is not possible to evangelize without persons who are converted and inspired, who feel the deep joy of faith. The skeptical, disaffected, fearful, boring and indifferent people, who create our dominant culture, will move only when they meet persons who are the very opposite by the force of their faith, who are not self-pretentious , joyful and helpful. With all this we want to say that the personal witness of living the faith with joy is decisive for the New Evangelization. “One of the obstacles for the New Evangelization is the absence of joy and hope…, often this lack of joy and hope are so strong that they influence our own Christian communities,” number 25 of the Lineamenta says. With the expression “New Evangelization”, John Paul II wanted to indicate, first of all, that today the Evangelization cannot do without a new fervor, because this "*is not a reduplication of the first one, it is not a simple repetition, but it consists of the courage of daring to go along new paths, opposite to the new conditions in which the Church is called to live today through the announcement of the Gospel*” (Lienamenta, nº 5).

Vincent's conviction on the need to be full of fervor (he called it a “zeal”) coincides with what the Church now proposes to us to carry out the project of the “New Evangelization”. In effect, this call of the Church, which has its origin in John Paul II, and on which Benedict XVI insists now, in addition to new contents and new expressions, speaks of a “new ardor”, which is no other than the updating of the apostolic zeal or of the Christian charity. A missionary who lacks zeal is, as Vincent well said, a skeleton of a missionary, a man who has lost the sense of life. Vincent rejoiced when he saw that his missionaries were working full of zeal. “Truly, Father, - he wrote to one of them - I cannot keep it to myself. I have to tell you in all simplicity that this gives me new and greater desires to be able, in the midst of my infirmities, to go and finish my life in the middle of a bush, working in some village, because I believe I would be much happier” (V, 185). Vincent was counting 75 years when he wrote this letter. When referring to the missionaries of Madagascar, he was filled with enthusiasm and exclaimed: "Those, yes, they are missionary. Yes, they are missionaries”. The contact with some missionary who stood out especially in the zeal, gave him a more positive vision of the Congregation, at the same time that it filled him with enthusiasm and joy.

On the contrary Vincent reacted with a tremendous virulence when he met missionaries lacking in virtue. “When you see a weak missionary, lacking in zeal, inclined to comfort and to rest, say with courage: the Anti-Christ has been born. Here he is!” (XI, 115). Fr. Antonino Orcajo, after having studied in great detail the virtue of zeal in St. Vincent, has written something that can shed light on the ways that we have been summoned by the Church for New Evangelization: "*The virtue of the zeal is the most important of the missionary vocation. Its unfolding covers the exercise of all the previous virtues*.” (A. ORCAJO, *El seguimiento de Jesús según San Vicente,* Ed. La Milagrosa, Madrid 1990, 213).

**3. Evangelization and Charity**

Since Vatican II the Church has been linking, little by little, mission-evangelization with charity. The expression “preferential option for the poor” is repeated so much in our Church, is a very clear proof that the poor, and the attention that the Church must given, must be an object of Evangelization. Actually, Lineamenta says this, though in a timid way. For the Church the style of the New Evangelization must be 'global'. And it explains it this way: ' it must be all-encompassing, including our way of thinking and our deeds, individual conduct and public witness, the interior life of our communities and their efforts at being missionary, their attention to education and their concerned dedication for the poor, and the capacity of every Christian actively to take part in the conversations taking place within real-life situations and the workplace, so as to bring to these situations the Christian gift of hope.” (Lineamenta, nº 16).

Vincent had a global vision very similar to the one we now hear when one speaks to us about New Evangelization. For Vincent, one has to evangelize “by word and work” (XI, 393) because the poor people " being condemned and dying of hunger.” There is an infinity of Vincent's texts where one can see this sensibility towards the poor, precisely in moments when he is thinking about the mission, because they are texts addressed to the first missionaries. Two would suffice. The first one is a text of the Common Rules in which it is expressly ordered that at the end of every mission a Confraternity of Charity be established (cf. RC I, 2). In the second, Vincent expresses explicitly that the preaching and the promotion of charity must not be separate. They are, rather, different parts of a complete evangelization. Let's hear his voice: "*if there is anyone among us who think they're in the Mission to evangelize poor people but not to alleviate their sufferings, to take care of their spiritual needs but not their temporal ones, I reply that we have to help them and have them assisted in every way, by us and by others, if we want to hear those pleasing words of the Sovereign Judge ...To do that is to preach the Gospel by words and by works, ad that's the most perfect way; it's also what Our Lord did*." (XII, 77-78).

Here is the new methodology used by Vincent in his re-evangelizing mission: to join charity and Evangelization, or to make of the charity, not only a Christian virtue, but a real evangelization. Because this evangelization does not take for object only the salvation of the soul (by means of the catechesis), but the human being in his totality (spirit and body). For Vincent, to evangelize is to "save" the poor person in his material and spiritual needs, i.e., “to make the Gospel effective”, according to his expression. We need to say that our official Church supports this “global form” of evangelization, although much more timidly that St. Vincent did it. Bridging the distances of different epochs, our Founder is much closer to the global concept of justice and evangelizing charity developed by the Theology of Liberation in Latin America.

**4. Evangelization and the laity.**

As soon as one goes deep into New Evangelization, at once one sees the importance of the laity in this project. The New Evangelization “cannot be left to a group of 'specialists' but must involve the responsibility of all the members of the People of God.” (Lineamenta, nº 24). Actually, the laity has always had importance in the Church, at least theoretically. In practice, we know that one has kept them for many centuries in passivity and ostracism. Why are the laity essential today in the project of the “New Evangelization”?. Because if it is a question of evangelizing the culture and of transforming the society, this mission is up to the laymen more directly than to anybody.

Vincent keeps pace with this current concern, since we know well that he never thought his project of mission and charity atthe margin of the laity. Furthermore, against the mentality of his time, the laity was the biggest force that he used for the renewal of the Church and of society.

The truly admirable thing in Vincent is that, although logically he shares the model of Church traced by Trent, nevertheless, at the same time he projected, by the force of his zeal, towards a different, undoubtedly much more evangelical, model of Church. In effect, we know that Trent reacted exaggeratedly against the excesses of Protestantism, exalting to the summit the figure of the priest and relegating the lay vocation. Well, within this context of the Tridentine Church and within this model of Church, Vincent, in addition to the option for the poor, will make another option against this model: the option for the laity and, among the laity, especially the woman, who were still more relegated in society and in the Church. Never was he against the official Church, but yes he allowed himself to remind what Trent forgot to say, precisely due to his sense of loyalty to the great Tradition of the Church. It has been said that Vincent never risked orthodoxy, but yes, he always did it in ortopraxis, motivated by the urgency of evangelization and the help for the poor.

Furthermore, our Founder is in great syntony with another conviction of the Church today: that baptism is the source- sacrament of Christian dignity (cf. chap. I of *Christifideles laici*). On it is based the holiness of the laity, underlined by Vatican II. It is true that St. Francis de Sales popularized the theme of the holiness of the laity; what is not said is that the one who got very enthusiastic with the doctrine of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* and *The Treatise on the Love of God* was Vincent de Paul. All this demonstrates that Vincent took an extraordinary sensibility to the laity, which did not happen in his time. And this sensibility the cause of the mobilization of so many laymen, both of men and women, who comprised the Confraternities of Charity, or the Daughters of Charity, but also other many thousands of laymen who collaborated promptly in his ecclesial charitable enterprises. Under all this sensibility for the laity there beats his own missionary experience of evangelizing the poor. He saw in the laity an opportunity to go to the poor in unaccustomed forms. This way, he began to find new means to include the laity in the ministry.

On the other hand, Vincent never sent anybody to work alone by himself. Here is another idea that coincides with the current mentality of the Church. Unorganized and solitary charity neither offers guarantees of continuity and effectiveness, nor reflects our Trinitarian faith. He provided structures that offered possibility of teamwork. The beginning of the Confraternity of Charity in Châtillon was an attempt of organizing the laity as a team, as Vincent's worry was not simply pastoral efficacy. He told the Volunteers of the Charity “they will have to love each other mutually as sisters that God has joined in the chain of love” (X, 675). They must pray the one for the other and “rejoice mutually with the warmth of God.” (X, 908). He intends to create in this way a spirit of community, a sense of belonging, which will encourage all the members.

**II. CONLUSION: WHERE DOES THE PROJECT OF THE NEW EVANGELIZATION IMPEL THE MISSIONARIES?**

Basing on what has been said so far, little effort is needed by either the Vincentian institutions or those who find themselves within the spiritual orbit of St. Vincent, to accept and adapt themselves to this universal project of “New Evangelization”. One has only to live the Vincentian spirit Vincentian to see oneself fully in the “New Evangelization”. Quite simple. With a proviso: Evangelization or the New Evangelization is directed to the whole society, to all the persons, without excluding anyone, although the Church, at least theoretically, has chosen preferentially the poor. Well, what is preferential for the Church in general, for the Vincentians turns into an exclusive option. It is our portion of work in the distribution of tasks that is done in the Church.

We might finish here this topic with an irreproachable conclusion: our way of answering the New Evangelization will consist in following the demands of our vocation, since St. Vincent was a new evangelist “avant le lettre”. We cannot ask anything more from the Church. Now then, the only thing that we can do to complete this topic is to ask what aspects of the New Evangelization are related to the mission that the Vincentian has to be especially attentive to so that he can respond better to this ecclesial project. These might be the responses:

**1. One has to grasp, to discern and to cultivate the new.**

One speaks of New Evangelization, of new evangelists, of new ardor, of new expressions, of reconfiguration, of new ministries more akin to our spirit, of new times, etc. The objective novelty exists, but is all this perceived in the Congregation, do the missionaries perceive it? It is not enough to be a mere observer of the new thing, to be informed and to be a mere transmitter of novelties. The New Evangelization asks us to be capable of grasping, of discerning, of taking up and of cultivating the new from the old terms, the new from the new expressions, the new from the events that repeat themselves and the new from the new times. In the heart itself of the New Evangelization we find this invitation to what is new: "*The New Evangelization is not a reduplication of the first one, it is not a simple repetition, but it consists of the courage to take new paths, faced with the new conditions in which the Church is called to live today through the announcement of the Gospel*”.(Lineamenta, No. 5). If Vincent had not chosen the new, neither the Confraternities, nor the missions, nor the laity, nor the Daughters of the Charity, nor the organization of the Charity would have been a reality in his time. The things would have continued in an exasperating routine.

An observation. To enter the new thing does not mean to give up the deep convictions on which are founded the life and the vocation of the evangelist. A building cannot be supported without foundations. Now then: what to do to face such rapid and deep innovations that today affect the evangelist, keeping, on the one hand, one's proper convictions and, on the other, the necessary flexibility “to transverse new paths”? Surely there does not exist another than the one already pointed out in the General Assembly 2010: personal reflection, reading, the determination not to remain out of touch today, and permanent formation. This project prepares us to be updated evangelists, as Vincent was in his time.

**2. The New Evangelization can be an occasion to revise the ministries.**

Evangelization has never been easy. Neither is it in our time. We know that the New Evangelization is demanding because it thrusts ahead breaking comfortable and sterile schemes and routines. What concrete requirements does this have in the life of the missionaries? Undoubtedly, that the New Evangelization can be, for example, a beautiful occasion to surpass the conservative ministry, one that is not suitable to impel the New Evangelization. We need to give the poor what he needs, without falling down into the immediate ministry of a hasty mentality, nor succumbing to the frequent temptation that the poor person demands little. It is not a question of what the poor person asks or demands, but of what the Vincentian evangelist must give him.

In Vincent we find the best example of creativity in the ministries. When he started the popular missions, he founded the Congregation of the Mission and established a plan of permanent formation for the diocesan clergy (the Tuesdays conferences); he did it because with the parochial structure of his time and with the ignorance of the clergy hardly was it possible to carry out the re-Evangelization of France. It was the passion for evangelizing that led to him to exceed the pastoral incapable of answering what the poor needed. This is the Vincentian spirit capably of asking how to renew our ministries to respond to the requirements of the New Evangelization.

The commitment to evangelize the poor forces the missionary to confront worthily the challenge that comes to him from the poor themselves. And today it does not seem possible to evangelize them without a serious doctrinal luggage, if one is not connected with his world, if one does not know the Social Doctrine of the Church in the aspects that affect his ministry, if one does not know the course and direction of modern and postmodern thought, and if one is not firm in the proper convictions. Perhaps, one has to interpret Vincent's phrase in this way “the poor are our teachers.” They can be the teachers for the Vincentian evangelists because we can learn very much in their school.

**3. The New Evangelization counsels a widening of horizons.**

We live in a world marked by social, cultural and even religious pluralism, very different from that of our grandparents, characterized, as we well know, by a homogeneity in everything and an autonomy and independence of every country. The powerful mass media, now within the reach of all, and the world phenomenon of the migration have been very decisive factors in the multicoloring of our European societies. The monocolor is gone. The New Evangelization must start from this very plural, very varied reality: for some, for instance, God still counts and the voice of the Church ha still credibility and weight. Others, on the contrary, live immersed in an ambience of unbelief and of indifference. Groups of persons also exist with a religious sense at the margins of the historical religions. The evangelist of the New Evangelization cannot be satisfied only with those that continue to be under the influence of the Church. This would be to reduce Evangelization to the ministry of conservation. Evangelization is directed to all.

Of the evangelizer is demanded today a wideness of horizons, attitude of welcome to all, the capacity to dialogue with the indifferent, with whom they search for answers to the questions that they feel deep inside them, with those who belong to other confessions. I believe that, in some sense also, it is possible to see this wideness of vision in Vincent himself, in spite of having lived in one century which combats any sign of pluralism. For example, we know that Calvinism was very strong in the region of Chatillon, where Vincent was nominated a pastor. It calls attention that when Vincent came to Chatillon, he stayed at the house of a Calvinist named John Beynier, who, with Vincent's presence, first changed his ways and later his faith. Later, seven nephews of Beynier left their Calvinist confession and became reconciled with the Catholic Church (cf. J. M. ROMAN, *San Vicente de Paúl. Biografía,* BAC, Madrid 1985, 123). Four or five years later, the event at Montmirail and Marchais would enlighten further the way: three Huguenots converted, one of whom complained with good reason that that the peasants were religiously abandoned.

A certain moment came when he proposed to his missionaries the method of Calvin's preaching: "*An example –*our Saint says *- which teaches us the interest with which we have to observe our method* (he was speaking about the little method*) is that of the Huguenots … Calvin also proposed a method of preaching: to take a book, as our Lord did it, to read, to explain it according to the literal and spiritual meaning, and then to extract the moral consequences …”* (XI, 193). To the Sisters whom he was going to establish in Metz, in Lorraine, he gives the following instruction: "*You go to announce God's kindness to all, to the Catholics and to the Protestants*.” (IX, 1094). And to a coadjutor Brother (surgeon by profession) who was destined to Madagascar he writes: "*One wishes that in the services that you do to God in the ship, there be no difference between Catholic and Protestant, so that these know that you love them in God.*” (Abelly, II, 20).

This wideness of vision, to which the New Evangelization calls us, we also see reflected in Vincent when with so much force he was trying to get his missionaries go out of the borders of France to evangelize the non-Christian world: Tunis, Algeria, Madagascar. He dreamed, although he could not see this dream realized, of going to difficult and remote places as, for example, Persia, Brazil and Canada.

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