Horizon shifts between the 17th and 20th centuries

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.
As friends who love one another deeply
- reflections on community living yesterday and today-
VINCENTIANA (2000), pp. 340 ss.

On many other occasions I have written about the nature of horizon shifts and their importance. They profoundly influence the way we see life. The view of the world from the top of Mount Everest is remarkably different from the view on a subway platform deep underground in London. Whether we react favorably or unfavorably to a given horizon shift, it greatly affects us and how we see the world around us.[1] Such shifts usually take place gradually, even without our noticing that our way of looking at things is changing. Often, looking back over the years, we may find ourselves marveling at how our view of life has been altered. At times such changes in world-view take place in some persons, but not in others. But even for those whose outlook remains unchanged, horizon shifts have a significant impact since these persons live more and more in a world where those around them have come to see things from a perspective very different from theirs.

Three horizon shifts have had a great influence on the way we view community living.

1.   A shift from a monarchical model of authority to a participative one.

Lumen Gentium, *Perfectae Caritatis*, *Ecclesiae Sanctae*, *Evangelica Testificatio* and many other documents made this shift a part of official Church thinking.[2] The revised constitutions of most communities quickly followed suit.

This new paradigm brings with it new expectations: dialogue, questioning, shared decision-making, shared responsibility. It emphasizes that authority serves the community and seeks to empower the group and individuals with it.

But this shift in horizon has also at times brought with it crises related to authority in the Church as well as in civil society. Dissent from official Church teaching has become rather common; e.g., in regard to birth control and other aspects of sexual morality. Civil unrest has become the inevitable response to governments that deny people a voice in regard to decisions affecting their future, resulting, for example, in an amazingly rapid change in the political situation in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, plus some openness and some renewed oppression in China.

Communities today are very conscious of biblical models of authority that emphasize its participative nature.[3] The servant model emphasizes that the leader comes from the community and exercises authority as one of its members, in order to unify it in pursuit of its goals. The servant-leader does not "lord it" over the members. Rather, he seeks to promote their gifts, animate their spiritual growth, and channel their energies toward their apostolic goals. The steward model affirms that the leader does not "possess" authority nor "own" the

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[1]Cf. *The Way of Vincent de Paul* (New York: New City Press, 1992) 48-52, 90-96; also, *He Hears the Cry of the Poor* (New York: New City Press, 1995) 60-63, 83-85.

[2]Cf. *Lumen Gentium* 18-28; *Perfectae Caritatis* 14; *Ecclesiae Sanctae* 18; *Evangelica Testificatio* 25.

[3]Bernard Lee "Community" in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, edited by Michael Downey (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993) 183-192.

community's goods. Power, as well as responsibility for material things, are placed in his hands as a trust. He is responsible to God and to the community for using this trust well. The shepherd model emphasizes the leader's closeness to the group. He knows and loves its members, calling them by name. He cares deeply even for those who stray. He is willing to lay down his life for his friends.

2.   *A transition from universally legislated structures to structures covenanted by local communities.*

For centuries, the basic structures of community living were legislated for the whole congregation. Forty years ago, for example, whether a visitor went to Rome or to Rio he would find that, even though Vincentians spoke different languages in those places, the basic forms of community life were quite similar. The community rose at 5 a.m., went to morning prayer and meditated for an hour. Then the priests probably celebrated private Masses, ate breakfast, and left for their apostolate. At midday all joined in a particular examen, followed by lunch. In the evening before supper, they prayed Vespers and perhaps anticipated Matins. Later they recited a common night prayer, after which the grand silence began.

Today, these and many other universally legislated structures have disappeared. Within the general framework of constitutions, statutes, and provincial norms, each local community is called to create the structures that will concretize the various values in its life: how will we carry out our specifically Vincentian mission in this house? how will we share daily life with one another? when and how will we pray together? how often will we meet for dialogue as part of our decision-making process? what meals and other "family" times will we commit ourselves to? In place of universally legislated structures, we are asked to forge *covenanted* structures. Questions like those above provide the framework for some of the decisions that form the covenant.

It is evident that covenanting, through local community plans, demands considerable creativity and responsibility from the members of the community. No longer do there exist detailed legislated structures that bind us from without; it is up to us to create structures that bind from within. Covenanting implies that, having created such structures, the community will abide by them. Fidelity to the covenant is crucial.

The Constitutions and Statutes propose the local community plan as the basic tool for covenanting. They list a number of items that should inevitably be included within the covenant,[4] as well as the need to evaluate it and revise it periodically.

Many local communities formulate covenants and live them out faithfully. Others, unfortunately, have less success, struggling with this new tool. Sometimes the covenant is little more than an order of day. Sometimes it is mainly the work of the local superior, with only perfunctory participation on the part of the confreres of the house. Sometimes it is copied year after year with little effort at evaluation and revision.

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[4]C 27: "Each community should work at developing a community plan, according to the Constitutions, Statues, and the provincial norms. We should use this plan as a means of directing our life and work, of fulfilling the recommendations we receive, and of examining periodically our life and activities." S 16: "The community plan which each community draws up for itself as far as possible at the beginning of the work year, should include all of the following: apostolic activity, prayer, the use of goods, Christian witness where we work, ongoing formation, times for group reflection, necessary time for relaxation and study, and an order of day. All these should be revised periodically."

3. *A shift from an industrial to an information society.*

Few things have influenced community living more profoundly. In more and more countries television and other means of communication are omnipresent. In many of our community houses the TV looms large in the rec hall, riveting the attention of almost all. With increasing frequency, confreres have individual television sets in their rooms, but sometimes at the cost of their being sealed off from the rest of the community. Over the last decade, computers have also come to occupy an important place in our lives. They aid significantly in our apostolate but can also become a lure to isolation. In many houses the phone rings constantly. In some parts of the world portable phones accompany a number of confreres wherever they go. Confreres have answered portable phones even while conversing with me in my room at the General Curia or as I chatted with them at the dinner table during a visit in a province.

The rapid communication and interruptions of the "information society" contrast sharply with the atmosphere in community houses three or four decades ago, when silence, reading at table, and "early to bed, early to rise" were prominent factors in life.

In light of these horizon shifts, it may be useful to reflect anew on the three mechanisms St. Vincent used for creating tight cohesion in local communities.

- Certainly the superior-subject relationship has changed greatly over the last several decades. Actually, change in this relationship is not a new phenomenon. There have been various models of authority in the course of the history of the Church. The key issue, whatever may be the *modus agendi* in a particular era, is surrender to the mystery of God's presence as mediated through others. The Church as a whole, and each community within it, has decision-making processes that are ways of discerning what God is asking of us at a given time. Such processes have been remarkably varied over the centuries. Sometimes they are quite democratic, as in the election of the Pope or the selection of an abbot. Sometimes they have been quite monarchical, as when prince-bishops ruled over their local dioceses in the same way that they ruled over their kingdoms. Sometimes they have been broadly participative, but with the final decision resting in the hands of a single person. We use a much more dialogic model of authority today than in St. Vincent's time.

- The place of "uniformity" has changed significantly with the transition from universally legislated structures to structures covenanted by local communities. We speak much more today of "unity in diversity."[5] Communities manifest a growing consciousness that in all relationships one must have a profound respect for "the irreducible other." The persons in a group cannot be fused into a mass in which their individual identities are indistinguishable; nor must any individual seek to absorb or dominate the personality of another. As we commit ourselves to a common future in the Lord, the evangelical means suggested by St. Vincent in *CR* II, 12 (listed above) are essential. At the heart of these means is a genuine love for one's brother or sister in community "as for oneself." In other words, we recognize them as fully equal companions on the journey toward the Lord.

- St. Vincent's third mechanism for creating tight cohesion, "community of goods," remains very important, even as we view it from within the changed horizon of an information society. Material inequalities in community continue to create tensions. The problem arises somewhat painfully at times in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Confreres born in those countries sometimes observe that the missionaries who live and work side by side with them in community have far greater financial resources

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[5]Cf. C 22.

than they themselves do. This problem, which is not easily resolved, inevitably creates some distancing. Today, in addition to speaking about community of "goods" in a material sense, we emphasize the importance of other forms of communion: sharing our journey, our personal story, our spiritual and apostolic experiences.[6] Sharing information is also vital if all are to feel included in the life and decisions of the Congregation. E-mail, which is rapid and relatively inexpensive, is already playing a significant role in this regard.

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[6] C 46.