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Embracing the "sentiments and affections" of Christ to "ignite" the missionary spirit

[Meditation on the Introduction and Chapter I of the "Common Rules"]

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St. Vincent wrote the *Rules* in several stages, beginning in 1625, during the initial, germinal phase of the Congregation, and completing them in 1658, 33 years later, during the final phase of his life—a period marked by physical decline but also full spiritual maturity. By then, St. Vincent, now elderly, admired God's work in his Community, the Mission, which he saw as a firmly established reality within the Church of his time. When distributing the *Rules*, he was fully aware and explicitly intent on transmitting a way of life. Thus, the *Rules* can primarily be seen as the "book of the transmission of a missionary experience." Only later, and only for those who have embraced that experience, does it become the "fundamental code" that governs missionary life. Every chapter resonates with the desire to convey a spirit even more than regulations.

St. Vincent devoted significant time to drafting the *Rules*, understanding well that a charism requires organization to endure over time. The original intuition, tested and solidified through experience, needed to be fixed in "letters" of intent and concretized in "rules" of behavior to "order" collective activity and direct it toward its purpose: "to follow Christ, evangelizer of the poor."

The *Rules of the Congregation* stand out among all other regulations written by St. Vincent (such as those for the Charity and the Daughters of Charity) because they connect directly to the experience he shared with his first companions, embodying the very way of life they describe. From this perspective, the *Common Rules* demonstrate the concrete possibility of inserting oneself into the Vincentian lineage and becoming its heirs.

First, there is missionary life, lived in a shared way of life; then, there are the *Rules*. St. Vincent could proudly claim that, in this too, the Congregation sought to conform to Christ, who "began first to do and then to teach." Life precedes everything and takes primacy. Therefore, St. Vincent assigned the *Rules* a unique purpose: to "ignite," "stimulate," and "arouse" the heart "to flee from vices and acquire virtues," to live the Gospel in an "apostolic way of life."

St. Vincent's language is notably "affective," prioritizing feeling over thinking. He followed the Augustinian tradition, inspired by St. Augustine, and was particularly influenced by the Jesuit Rule. Indeed, Father Jean-Baptiste de Saint-Jure, S.J., helped St. Vincent draft the rules on disciplinary norms regarding silence, detachment, indifference, obedience, punctuality, readings, and spiritual exercises. In the Ignatian proto-pedagogy of the *Exercises*, there is mention of "ardor of affections": the disciple of the Lord must "move the affections with the will" and "feel and savor internally" Cold thoughts, words, and deeds must become warm through the excitement of desire. Alongside the school of the intellect, St. Ignatius placed the school of affection for the education of the heart, for the refinement of feelings, and for the cultivation of the interior life.

For St. Vincent, the stirring of the heart elevates prayer and fuels fervor. This "affective impetus" sustains faith and prevents spiritual practices from becoming dry religious actions, the Gospel from becoming rigid observance, and Mission from turning into a burdensome activity.

The *Common Rules* prevent this. They ignite desire and inspire a genuine missionary spirit because they "emanate from the Spirit of God." St. Vincent adds, "For this reason, we have endeavored, as much as we could, to draw all the Rules from the spirit of Jesus Christ and the works of His life… since we consider that men called to continue Christ's mission of evangelizing the poor must possess the same 'sentiments' and 'affections' of Christ (*Christi sensibus et affectibus*)… 'filled' with His Spirit and 'following' His footsteps."

Thus, Chapter I of the *Common Rules*, "Institution and Purpose of the Congregation," assigns the Congregation the task of "imitating Christ the Lord, both in virtues (attitudes and sentiments) and in

ministries (the salvation of others, especially the poor)." This is achieved by: 1 – striving for personal perfection; 2 – evangelizing the poor, especially those in rural areas; 3 – assisting clergy in acquiring the knowledge and virtues necessary for their state. This final formulation of 1658 was preceded by two others regarding the purpose of the Congregation.

In the Bull *Salvatoris nostri* of Urban VIII (1633), it is stated that "the principal aim and special purpose of said Congregation and its members is, with God's help, to dedicate themselves not only to their own salvation but also to that of those living in villages, towns, hamlets, and the most humble rural areas." This formulation emphasizes a spiritual purpose, "dedicating oneself to personal salvation and that of the poor," presupposing both an interior life (for oneself) and rural missions (for the poor).

In the Rules approved by the Archbishop of Paris (*Codex Sarzana, 1655*), the Congregation's purpose is described as "following in the footsteps of Christ, who came to do the will of the Father by proclaiming the Gospel to the poor," with specific goals: "a) to fulfill God's will in all things, like Jesus; b) to evangelize the poor, especially those in rural areas; c) to assist clergy in acquiring the knowledge of the saints to guide people along the path of salvation." The insistence of this formulation is on doing the will of God, characteristic of the mission of Jesus Christ and, at the same time, the way to reach perfection for the members of the Congregation.

Although these three formulations differ in emphasis, St. Vincent's constant concern is evident: highlighting the poor as the privileged recipients of the Gospel and the Congregation's mission, especially those most impoverished, the rural people, who are the most abandoned spiritually and most tested humanly. Even the specification *maxime ruriculis* ("especially in rural areas") appears in the founding contract of the Congregation signed by St. Vincent with the Gondi family on April 17, 1625, characterizing and motivating the birth of a new form of apostolic life.

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