



Apostoles for Today

Prayer and reflection - December 2008

Fundamental Rule 4 – Vows and Promises

"Vows can be made privately, for a fixed period of time, with the consent of the spiritual director and they can be renewed. This consent is given with the understanding that the respective rector can annul such vows even before the period for which they were taken has expired. If the member who has made the vow leaves the congregation, whatever the reason for leaving, the vows are annulled." (OCC III, p. 41)

St. Vincent speaks to us of vows, spiritual directors, rectors or superiors words and terms all that remind us of fidelity, commitment, service, virtues. While cherishing the reflections we have been offered each month I would like to share with you as a member of our common family of the Union, the ideas and feelings that have arisen in me while reflecting on this point of the fundamental rule.

Reflection

I would like to open with a passage from the Gospel: "The Kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field which someone has found; he hides it again, goes off happy, sells everything he owns and buys the field.

Again, the Kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls; when he finds one of great value he goes and sells everything he owns and buys it" (Mt 13, 44-45).

Some time ago, during a session of catechesis for adults and elderly persons, this passage from the New Testament was read and we reflected together on what it would mean to meet the Lord in our lives and on what would change "afterwards". There were many comments and remarks, all were convinced that to meet Jesus would mean to begin something new, something different from what had gone "before", as if we would not be the same persons any more. We said that this does not happen just once in a life-time but in many moments and different circumstances. We all began to make a long list of

things that would have to be done to show our acceptance of, and devotion to, Jesus. Many things and as the enthusiasm grew, very different things. However, at a certain point a woman, perhaps the oldest, said: “this is all very well, but it is so difficult!” The others were all in agreement with this. They turned to me, the group catechist, for a reply, a solution. I felt that they were right: the way of God is difficult, it is very demanding. I had to look deep within myself as I did not want to merely come up with a response that was rational or catechetical. Briefly I looked back on my own experiences, right back to my time in secondary school when I met a person who truly lived the Gospel, then I also was won over to this new life, my own life changed. But, I had to also be thankful to God because I recognized that if I am still on this path it is thanks to him, my own will and efforts would not have been sufficient to remain faithful. Deep within I felt that it has been the presence of the Lord in my life and in the community of which I am a member that has kept me on the path. I shared all this with those who were present and did not hide the fact that I would have changed paths often had it not been for the help of God and of my brothers and sisters. It has been, and is, difficult to be consistent with the Christian way of life, but with these resources and help it has been possible and true.

My own personal experience has shown me clearly that the origin of everything is the encounter with God; it can be through a thousand circumstances which differ for every person that we come in contact with something that enters into our lives and changes it from within. It is not something imposed from outside, it occurs within us. The first thing born of that fundamental encounter was, naturally (if one can use this term to refer to the things of God) to begin with a spirit of service towards all persons. Prior to this I would have made distinctions between the persons I found congenial and those I found disagreeable, between those who thought as I did and those who were different to me, between those who I found interesting and those who were of no use to me. This changed. Jesus loved every person. I also wanted to do the same. However, realizing how extremely difficult it is to live charity always, I soon began to discover that prayer and the sacraments are indispensable resources to progress on this path. Sharing this way of life with others has also been indispensable for me. Gradually we committed ourselves to progressing together even though our defects and our fears became ever more evident.

In the light of this I believe that all of us, both in the Union and beyond it, have experienced the desire to commit ourselves to God and to others. The charism has inspired us on how to live our commitment, but it has been, and is, the encounter with God which moves us (charitas Christi URGET nos), and God knows just how much we need these nudges. It must be said that we have often experienced, or maybe are presently experiencing, the darkness within us and around us and there are many reasons for this: in such times we have slowly discovered that what we termed “the Cross”, has been the time when our commitment was put to the test. Such times are often moments of grace, of blessings, even though the price to be paid is often high. Personally I have learned that in such moments we meet Jesus, and our encounters then are stronger than at other times; in all of this the life of St. Vincent has a lot to teach us.

If someone were to ask us what the Union is, what the charism is that gives it life and inspires it, we would give the necessary explanation (here I think of our Statutes), but we should also tell them how we live our daily lives with God and with those who are near to us. We could tell of an experience in order that the person who is listening understands just what God has done in us and amongst us. When St. Vincent met persons, and nobody came close to him in vain, he communicated something which drew them to him, which engaged them, something that brought them closer to God. The riches we have received are indeed great! But we cannot live on that, on our inheritance, as if it were a bank account to which we go and from which we draw out when we do not have any more money, and which, furthermore, we did not set up ourselves but rather another did it for us. We cannot merely live on the rent of others. If this treasure, this pearl, this charism has been present in our lives, if it has triggered off and continues to produce a change of life in us and amongst us, then we must communicate this as if it were the greatest riches, because it is all the merit of God, it is all his gift. Then the bank account would increase, and all persons will be able to “draw on it”.

In the gatherings of the Union, in the Congresses and also in interpersonal relationships, I have been greatly enriched in listening and communicating, in conveying how this common commitment is lived. There are very different cultures present in the Union and these diversities increase the riches. May we never tire of journeying together, of sharing our experiences

of the Spirit with one another, because this is our wealth. Our commitment, therefore, which is so well expressed in our annual renewal of the Act of Apostolic Commitment, is a commitment to God and to all persons. Jesus is the Apostle of the Father because of the love which binds them together, so too, from our mutual love and from our sharing amongst ourselves, will the world know Christ, indeed it already knows him because there are many expressions of this already taking place.

Christmas is coming close. Let us ask the Lord to be born in us, to remain in us and amongst us in the ways that only He knows how to invent. May we show ourselves both willing and ready to be consistent with and faithful to our commitment, placing all our confidence in Jesus. A commitment to fidelity and to communion, a commitment to unity in the Church and of service to all persons.

Let us conclude, with:

St. Paul: “My brothers, you were called to liberty; but be careful, or this liberty will provide an opening for self-indulgence. Serve one another in works of love, since the whole of the Law is summarised in a single command: Love your neighbour as yourself” (Gal. 5, 13-14);

St. Vincent: “I will look on all that concerns God as the hidden treasure and I will strive to liberate myself from all that prevents me from acquiring it, and when I have acquired it, I will consider it as hidden to me, because I will never understand the value of the things of God” (OCCC. X, 7);

Pope Benedict XVI at Lourdes (14.09.2008): “Dear brothers and sisters ... you who see before your eyes the infinite humiliation of the Son of God and the infinite glory of the resurrection, remain in silence and adore your Lord, our Master and Lord Jesus Christ. Remain in silence, then talk and say to the world “we cannot keep silent what we know”. Go and tell the entire world of the marvels of God, present in every moment of our lives, in every place on earth. May God bless us and protect us, may he lead us on the path to eternal life, He who is Life, for ever and ever. Amen.