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The following article was written by Fr Tim Williams CM for the September 2001 issue of 'Oceania Vincentian' . ('Oceania Vincentian' is a Publication in the Australian Province of the Vincentians):

In the Company of Friends

Tim Williams CM

In September 2000, I was invited to contribute to the Programme conducted by John Rybolt CM at the Vincentian *Centre of International Formation* (CIF), located in Paris, France. The area of my contribution was 'Vincentian Community Life as presented in our Constitutions'.¹ The presentations I made over several days triggered the reflections on a particular aspect of Community Life which I have set out in this article.

At the time, I asked myself, (and still do) "What is my qualification for making any sort of a presentation (or writing an article) on Vincentian Community Life?" As I said to the Confreres at CIF in Paris, if I have a qualification in this area it is that I have lived in Vincentian Communities for over 30 years, survived, and still believe in Community Life! I do not intend to try to set myself up as an authority, but rather to encourage Vincentians who might read this article to ponder a little further on what the essence of Community in the Congregation of the Mission might be.

We clearly live in a society which is quite different to that in which I myself grew up. That can probably be said of most of us. Sociologists and Anthropologists are of course able to categorise and analyse society and its changes and cultures in various ways, and even propose 'models' of change and culture.² Gerald Arbuckle, in his recent work on Healthcare Ministry, proposes that a 'Paramodern' Culture is emerging.³ In referring to this model of culture, he quotes Walter Anderson who maintains that in such a culture we glimpse new ways of thinking about ourselves and how we might co-exist with others.⁴ In the Congregation of the Mission, our present Superior General, Fr Robert Maloney CM, speaks of the 'Horizon Shifts' that have taken place between the time of Vincent de Paul and the present time.⁵

If we accept that our Constitutions, as well as being normative, are also indicative of the times in which they are written, it seems that continued reflection on our Vincentian Tradition, an important part of which has been Community Life, is something that is required if future General Assemblies are to ensure that our Constitutions are to articulate a tradition that continues to develop.

Since we are all products of a society in some form, it is likely that we would bring something of society at a variety of stages of development into our various communities. It is appropriate, perhaps even necessary, that we be willing look beyond such simplistic assertions as 'if we all lived together in a community house there would be no problems !!', or, at the other end of the spectrum, 'if anyone lives alone, they are really outside the community'. I have heard both comments made.

So I will attempt to go beyond such comments by considering what seems to have become for us a 'metaphor' or 'myth' in our community, the idea of a community life where we live 'as good friends'. By the term 'metaphor' I am not referring to the literary idea of comparison, but rather to that which is essential and basic to our Community Life, without which we cannot have Community Life, and which

must be present if we can honestly say we are living a 'Vincentian Community Life'. By the term 'myth' I do not of course mean something that is make-believe, but rather something that lies deep within the roots of our Vincentian Tradition. Nor do I intend to imply that living as 'good friends' is the only requirement of community life. But I believe it is an essential one, in the terms in which I will reflect on it.

A Tradition of long standing

In relation to Life in Common in the Congregation of the Mission, the requirement that its members would live together 'as good friends' is indeed of long standing. It was present in the Codex Sarzana⁶ :

Ut charitas fraternitatis, ac sancta unio semper maneat in nobis, et omnimode conseruetur, singuli se inuicem magna reverentia prosequuntur, **in morem tamem charorum amicorum** inter se semper conuiuentes⁷

This Latin text is identical to that which found its way into the *Common Rules or Constitutions of the Congregation of Mission*⁸ and which Vincent de Paul gave to the Community in 1658. In English, in the Common Rules, it reads:

Love, like that between brothers, should always be present among us, as well as the bond of holiness, and these should be safeguarded in every possible way. For this reason, there should be great mutual respect, and we should get along as good friends⁹

This phrase 'as good friends' is further quoted in the Constitutions of 1984:

.... following Christ the Evangelizer as a community we should 'like good friends' (Common Rules, VIII,2) join reverence for one another with genuine esteem;¹⁰

The idea of our good relationships with each other is emphasised in other parts of our Constitutions in various terms, such as the following:

St Vincent brought confreres together with Church approval so that, living in a new form of community life, they might undertake the evangelisation of the poor. The Vincentian community is, therefore, organised to prepare its apostolic activity, and to encourage and help it continually . And so members, individually and collectively, should strive to fulfill their common mission through a wholehearted spirit of renewal in fraternal union.¹¹

And also:

The Community is continually responsible for its own development, especially as we renew the principal elements of our way of living and acting..... In this way our life becomes truly a community of friendship, work, prayer, and goods.¹²

A Community of Unity and Harmony

In the society in which Vincent lived, it seemed that while the structures provided the glue to hold us together, all that was necessary was that harmony be preserved. For this reason, the requirements listed in the Common Rules seem to seek to bring about this unity and harmony, while not addressing specifically deeper issues about the community.

However, the Constitutions of 1984 say that:

.....fraternal life together, continually fostered by the mission, forms a community which promotes both personal and community development, and renders the work of evangelisation more effective.¹³

Personal and human development is clearly of fundamental importance when reflecting on living 'as good friends'. But how, in our present society, does 'fraternal life together' render the work of evangelisation more effective ? Are we just looking for harmony and unity, as Vincent seemed to be, or is there more to it. Just how are 'Fraternal Life' and 'Evangelisation' related?

Friendship and Evangelisation

Living together as 'good friends' implies some type of 'friendship'. Pat Collins CM, an Irish Vincentian, has given the title of *Friendship and Evangelisation* to the last chapter in a book of his on Spirituality.¹⁴

Fr Collins points out to us the precedents for the value of friendship, and the link between 'friendship' and 'evangelisation'. He quotes the Scriptures¹⁵, as implying this link, and also reminds us that during the course of history, there have been notable examples of religious friendships: Thomas Aquinas and Albert the Great, Bernard of Clairvaux and Aelred of Riveaulx, Francis and Clare, and more closely associated with us – Pierre de Bérulle and Madame Acarie, Francis de Sales and Jane Francis de Chantal, and of course, Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac¹⁶.

It is interesting to note that all of these great friendships have been generative, that is, they have given rise, in a variety of particular ways, to what we would call establishing the Reign of God.

What kind of friendship ?

Even before Vincent handed the Common Rules to the Confreres, the Codex Sarzana had this to say:

Brotherly love should always be present among us, as well as the bond of holiness, and these should be safeguarded in every possible way. For this reason, there should be a great mutual respect, and we should get along as good friends, always living in community. We should particularly avoid exclusive friendships, as well as any sort of ostracism, as experience has shown that these give rise to factions and destroy Congregations.¹⁷

As Fr Collins tells us, this ideal later found its expression in the Common Rules in 1658.¹⁸ Although it seems that Vincent was aware that individual members of the community could form deep friendships of the non-exclusive kind, it would seem he advocated closeness rather than intimacy, friendliness rather than friendship, a friendliness which gave rise to charitable actions.¹⁹ What he had in mind was a oneness based on conformity to the mind and heart of Jesus Christ. To Vincentian Missionaries departing for Ireland he says:

Be united and God will bless you; but this union must be the love of Jesus Christ within you The spirit of Jesus Christ is a spirit of union and peace.²⁰

To the same Missionaries, emphasising unity among themselves, he further says:

How could you expect to attract other souls to Jesus Christ if you are were not united among yourselves? Have the same sentiments, therefore, the same will, or else you will be like those horses pulling a plow, who pull in opposite directions. They spoil everything. God calls you to work in this vineyard. Go therefore, having but a single heart and a single intention, and in this way you will bear much fruit.²¹

With all this - the foundation of unity in Jesus Christ and among ourselves and a certain closeness in our relationships with each other - Fr Collins holds that friendships in the community would have the following characteristics:

- Friendliness or cordiality, i.e., emotional warmth.
- Gentleness and compassion
- Mutual respect – even when we are affronted
- Loving action – coming out of affective love. The way we feel about companions should be shown in charity.²²

But, can we say more ? Can we claim that the relationships of friendship/friendliness in the Congregation of the Mission are more than simply support and unity in order to facilitate evangelisation ?

A Community both 'Unitive' and 'Generative'

Fr Collins suggests that the relationship between Louise and Vincent was a 'generative' friendship²³, a friendship that gave rise to evangelisation and service of the poor. I would like to follow that with the idea that living together as 'good friends' could be regarded as having two aspects – one 'unitive', the other 'generative'.

'Unitive' Friendship

In the Common Rules, Vincent spoke of what would bring about harmony in the Community. Our own Constitutions tell us that we aim to be a community of friendship, work, prayer and goods. By sharing our friendship, work, prayer and goods harmoniously, we hope to develop as a community, and thus be more effective in our work. This is the unity among ourselves Vincent often spoke of. Sharing these aspects of our lives harmoniously will bring unity and effectiveness to the community.

'Generative' Friendship

Martin Buber (an Austrian Philosopher), advocating a personalist philosophy²⁴, proposes that we approach the idea of Friendship Love through an I-Thou relationship. The 'I' relates to the 'Thou' through openness to the other and preparedness to give of self. Each claims the other and the relationship is sought for the benefit of both. Out of this Friendship Love comes a move towards others - a 'We' which leads to a new HUMAN Reality in which each personality retains its uniqueness. This 'We' then moves outwards towards OTHERS without expecting a reciprocation.

In the Congregation of the Mission, the intimate relationship of 'friendship love' that Buber refers to does not necessarily exist between individuals, even if our need for closeness in our lives is satisfied by friendship with some confreres. It is good, and probably necessary, for everyone to have some close friend or friends, someone with whom we can be completely open and before whom we have few or no secrets. Closeness is not only possible, but also desirable for celibates, and these friends may or may not be within the community.

But I would like to suggest that a relationship which is truly generative for us, and which is available to all confreres, is that which exists between the individual Confrere and the Vincentian Tradition or

Vincentian Way. The Confrere, the 'I', seeks a bond between himself and the Vincentian Tradition, the 'Thou' as embodied in and lived out by its bearers, the Confreres (and other members of the Vincentian Family), who are hopefully "a sign in the church to faithful dedication to the poor."²⁵ The individual Confreres have a friendship love with the Tradition in which both the confrere and the Tradition are enhanced or grow. The Confrere is to be open to be formed by the Tradition. And the Tradition has to be open to being re-worked by the individual bearers of that Tradition, the confreres. The Confrere befriends and claims the Vincentian Tradition, and the Tradition befriends and claims the Confrere. This happens at all levels – the local, the provincial and the international.

In the case of the Confreres and the Vincentian Way or Tradition, the new reality is that of evangelising the poor. And so our Community is directed to the Mission. As the Community moves out to others by evangelising, it does so without necessarily expecting any response from others. The encounter is sought for the benefit of the other, not primarily for the benefit of the community or the confrere. This is the type of love that God has for humanity – a reaching out that does not depend on a reciprocal response. It will continue to be offered, even if no response is (perceived as) forthcoming. The poor, or those to whom we minister, often do not appear to respond, nor are they expected to. This relationship is thus a 'generative' relationship because of what it gives rise to.

The above means that 'Living as Good Friends' has much more than a functional or 'unitive' purpose of grouping people together to make the work more efficient. Our effective evangelisation comes not just from the coordinated efforts of a few people working together in harmony, but also from the generative relationship between the confreres and the Vincentian Tradition, a relationship facilitated by sharing our work, prayer and goods.

The two aspects are interdependent. Each supports the other, and is necessary for the other. Unless we are in harmony with each other, we will not befriend the Vincent Way or Tradition. In fact we will find it burdensome and restrictive. On the other hand, if we have not befriended the Vincentian Way or Tradition, we will find it difficult to live harmoniously, to share friendship, work, prayer and goods. Friendships will be exclusively outside the community or exclusive within the community; work will be our own private affair and we will not be accountable to anyone within the community, prayer will not be a community value, and accountability and responsibility in use of goods will cause undue tension.

Personalisation ?

Can we personalise our Community and our Tradition in a way implied by a generative friendship as discussed above ? Some will argue against such an approach. But I believe the approach can throw light on our concept of friendship, especially when we claim to belong to a tradition of which the individual confreres, as well as the community as a whole, are the bearers, and which has Jesus Christ as Evangelizer for the centre and foundation of that tradition.

In particular, we can consider the question against the background of two mysteries that are fundamental to our Vincentian Tradition - Trinity and Incarnation. As we see in the Common Rules:

According to the Bull which established our Congregation, we are bound to honor in a special way the Most Holy Trinity and the Incarnation, mysteries beyond words.....²⁶

Trinity

A Personalist philosophy can speak to us about the Trinity. Denis Edwards, an Australian Theologian, takes a 'Personalist' approach to the Trinity.²⁷ He draws from Richard of St. Victor, a Western Theologian (d.1173) whose insight into friendship leads him to suggest that the supreme love of God requires at least two persons in order for the 'I-Thou' to exist. Then, real love does not remain within

two persons, but wants to share this love with another. He sees the friendship in the Trinity as breaking out to include a third. And so we have the Three Persons.

Thus the Trinity as a model of 'friendship' can be a concept of great importance to us in our relationship with the Vincentian Community and Tradition, the 'I – Thou' creating a movement to 'we' and outwards. Given that the Trinity is seen as fundamental to our Tradition, and was also of course, important to Vincent, this may well have something to say to us in the context of 'friendship'.

Incarnation

Vincent saw the face of God in the poor. The face of a personal God. This became the basis of his own ministry to the poor, and thus of Vincentians who came after him in the Congregation of the Mission. While we may not all have experienced the conversion to the poor that Vincent experienced, it is fundamental in our Congregation that our mission is directed towards the poor.

For Vincent, and for ourselves, to be able to see God in the persons of the poor, and indeed in all to whom we minister, is Incarnational. We begin from our belief and understanding of a personal God being present in the people we serve. Fr Hugh O'Donnell CM, a former Provincial of the Midwest Province of the USA, and also of the Province of China, comments on this in regard to the diverging paths of Vincent de Paul and Pierre de Bérulle :

I began to reach the conclusion that Vincent's separation from Cardinal de Bérulle was not something he chose to do, rather it was something he had to do I believe there was a deep reason why Vincent found himself on another path than Bérulle's. The reason is this. For Bérulle, God was elsewhere. He regarded life in terms of taking what was happening in front of him and bringing it to the Divine Liturgy before the throne of God. Vincent's experience led him in the opposite direction. For Vincent, God is here and the Divine Liturgy is in front of us. God here: That's why we can say the Poor are our Masters. God is here! ²⁸

If we believe that God is present in the poor and those to whom we minister, can we not say the same of our own confreres in the Community ? Do we not believe that God is present in our Community to whom we also minister ? Is not Jesus the Evangelizer incarnated in this Community ? Can we not say that the 'friendship' aspect of our community life is actually worked out amidst the reality of all our human interactions and limitations, perhaps even because of them, acknowledging that 'God is here' among us who are bearers of the Vincentian 'Way'?

Surely this gives a basis for some 'Personalisation' of our Tradition.

Remaining Good Friends ?

Jesus the Evangelizer was incarnated in an ever-changing world. Remaining 'good friends' in an ever-changing society is a continuous challenge for all of us. While the current Constitutions may seem to assume that we live in community houses together,²⁹ the reality, determined by the work we are called to do, and perhaps other circumstances, is sometimes otherwise. There is no reason why we cannot live as good friends in a variety of different models of community. Fr Bob Maloney CM has written on this, proposing as examples some models of community we might expect to find today.³⁰ He offers several generic models, while acknowledging that others must be possible. Examples he gives are (in summary):

A Modified Traditional Model: (e.g., a Provincial or Central House) a large local community where all are able follow the same order of day even though they are engaged in different ministries.

A "Bubbling-Up from the Bottom" Model: (e.g., a school) with a reasonably sized community (around 8 confreres) where all are united by a particular work, but adapt their order of day around this.

A Small Community Model: (e.g., a parish) where a small number of confreres carry out one or more ministries.

A Dispersed Community Model: (e.g., the mission to a region), where the confreres live individually because of the nature of their work but are able to come together periodically.

(Fr Maloney CM has previously written on possible models of Community Life in his book *Seasons of Spirituality*.³¹)

If we are to remain as 'good friends' for the sake of evangelisation, it may well be that we need to develop new models of Vincentian Community Life which are suitable for the societies and times in which we live, and at the same time find new ways of retaining the value of being 'good friends' to go with these models. For some, this will be embraced enthusiastically. Others may find it difficult. All of us will find it a challenge. In his own time, Vincent de Paul had the courage to accept that challenge:

St Vincent brought confreres together with Church approval so that, living in a new form of community life, they might undertake the evangelisation of the poor....³²

Endnotes

1. The term 'Constitutions' as used here, and elsewhere in this article (including footnotes), refers to the *Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission*, promulgated at Rome, 1984. The translation used is the English Translation, Philadelphia, 1989.

2. Examples of such works are: Holland Joe, Henriot SJ, Peter, *Social Analysis – Linking Faith and Justice*, (Blackburn: Dove and Orbis/Center of Concern, 1983); Hug SJ, James E., Ed., "Tracing the Spirit – Communities, Social Action, and Theological Reflection", *Woodstock Studies 7* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983).

3. Arbuckle, Gerald A., *Healthcare Ministry - Refounding the Mission in Tumultuous Times*, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000), 37.

4. Anderson, Walter T., *The Truth About Truth: De-confusing and Re-constructing the Postmodern World*, (New York: Putnam, 1995), 11.

5. Maloney CM, Robert, "As Friends Who Love One Another Deeply", *Vincentiana*, 44, (2000): 342ff.

6. Note: The *Codex Sarzana* is a set of documents predating the Common Rules (perhaps as early as 1653) and which was discovered in the twentieth Century by Fr Angelo Coppo CM in the archives of the then Congregational House at Sarzana, Italy. The Codex, now in the archives of the Congregation of the Mission in Rome, contains Vincent's thoughts and ideas regarding life in the Community, many of which would later pass into the *Common Rules or Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission*.

7. Rybolt, J., "Codex Sarzana", *Vincentiana*, 33/4-5 (1991): 327.

8. The *Common Rules or Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission* were given to the members of the Congregation of the Mission by Vincent de Paul in 1658, two years before he died. This was the first time that rules for the Community were formally written down, even though the Congregation had been founded in 1625. In this article, these rules will be referred to by the term 'Common Rules'. The original Common Rules were written in Latin - the translation used in this article is the English Translation from Philadelphia, 1989.

9. Common Rules, VIII, #2.

10. Constitutions #25.1

11. Constitutions #19.

12. Constitutions #25.

13. Constitutions #21.2
14. Collins CM, Patrick, "Friendship and Evangelisation", *Spirituality for the 21st Century – Christian Living in a Secular Age*, (Dublin: The Columba Press, 1999), 180.
15. Collins, 181ff.
16. Collins, 184.
17. Rybolt, J., "Codex Sarzana", 327 (Translation: Collins, 185).
18. Common Rules VIII, #2.
19. Collins, 188.
20. Abelly, Louis, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God, Vincent de Paul*, (New York: New City Press, 1993), Vol 2, 126.
21. Abelly, Vol 2, 126.
22. Collins, 186-187.
23. Collins, 185.
24. This Philosophical framework of Martin Buber can be found in works such as: Buber, Martin, *I and Thou*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1966); Buber, Martin, *Between Man and Man*, (London: Collins, 1973).
25. Mannix CM, "The Congregation of the Mission and the Mission of the Church to the Poor", *Oceania Vincentian*, 1, (2000): 7.
26. Common Rules, X, #2.
27. Edwards, D., *The God of Evolution – a Trinitarian Theology*, (New York: Paulist Press, (1999), 23ff.
28. O'Donnell, H, "Apostolic Reflection", *Vincentiana*, 38/4-5, (1994): 285.
29. Constitutions #21.
30. Maloney CM, Robert, "As Friends Who Love One Another Deeply", *Vincentiana*, 44/4-5, (2000): 347-351.
31. Maloney CM, Robert, *Seasons in Spirituality*, (New York: Hyde Park, 1998): 143ff.
32. Constitutions #19.
