

# BALANCING BASICS

## Balancing Basics

Vincent – balancing basics

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After 50 years of priesthood I still struggle with the issues of balancing basics. Having been ordained in 1965 I was quickly exposed to a spirit of activism. I remember being very caught up with the concept of “leaving God for God.” After all, Vincent expressed that idea ... and expressed it often. And then I woke up one day years later and realized I was no longer “a man of prayer.” The exception had become the rule! A truth became a caricature. It took me a long time to realize that to live a balanced life you have to mix the basics together.

Perhaps that is why I personally was so struck by words of our newly elected Superior General Fr. Tomas Mavric...when in his first homily after his election he invited Vincentians “to keep discovering, developing, and deepening Vincent’s way: being a “Mystic of Charity.” (1) It is not that I have not heard this call to unite contemplation and action before. I was reminded about that six months ago when J. Patrick Murphy gave me copy of his booklet Mr. Vincent.

Vincent balanced and intermingled prayer, reflection and action in his life and work.

**Lesson: It is easier to live a balanced life if you mix the basics together.**

Actually, I have been hearing it since for more than 60 years ago when I entered formation. Early on I heard that Vincent said, “True missionaries ought to be like Carthusians in their houses and like apostles outside them.” Abelly

Give me a man of prayer and he will be capable of everything. He may say with the apostle, “I can do all things in him who strengthens me.” The Congregation will last as long as it faithfully carries out the practice of prayer, which is like an impregnable rampart shielding the missionaries from all manner of attack. SV XI, 83

In the 1980’s our revised Constitutions put it this way...

42.—Apostolic involvement with the world, community life, and the experience of God in prayer complement one another and make an organic unity in the life of a missionary. For, when we pray, faith, fraternal love, and apostolic zeal are constantly renewed; and in action, the love of God and neighbor is effectively manifested. Through the intimate union of prayer and apostolate a missionary becomes a contemplative in action and an apostle in prayer.

For readers of famvin.org this line of thought should not be new. In 1997 Sr. Gertrude Foley, SC , spoke about trivializing our charisms if we did not recognize the mystical insights that empowered our founders. **“I think that we trivialize our charism and tradition, if we limit it to mean only works of service....the grounding insight of our founders was mystical, powerful and empowering.** This was the insight that answered their questions, allayed their doubts, and strengthened them when the testing came.”

“Unless we are as passionate as our founders were to grow daily into this identification with Jesus and his mission, we cannot claim the name Vincentian. We can exhaust ourselves in implementing our strategies to serve the poor. But as Vincentians we will fail, if we do not contextualize all of our service in the three-way identification seen so clearly by our founders: the trinitarian relationship, if you will, among Jesus, the poor person, and the servant of the poor, We take certain pride (holy, I hope) in the practical, down-to-earth quality of our charism and tradition. That is true enough. Nevertheless, **the grounding insight of our founders was mystical, powerful and empowering.** This was the insight that answered their questions, allayed their doubts, and strengthened them when the testing came.”

[Visit the Vincentian Encyclopedia for the full presentation of this 1997 presentation to the Vincentian Family at St. John’s University.]



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## The Successors of St. Vincent

Fr. Mavric is but the latest of Vincent's successors to say this. Vincent's 23rd successor Fr. Gregory Gay in his last formal address to the community put it this way... If we are tired, if we are worn out, it is because we do not give ourselves fully enough to meditation on the experience of the poor whom we encounter, finding strength in the grace of God that comes through prayer. Let me say it. We need to pray more. Every letter to the confreres, after a canonical visitation, mentions the need to deepen our sense of unity with Jesus Christ in our prayer and private meditation, as well as in our communal prayer. We need to reflect on our experience of Jesus Christ in the poor, whom we encounter, and be nourished by it. Why are we tired? Perhaps because we do not give ourselves enough to Jesus Christ in prayer so that he might rekindle the fire within us to go out and preach the Good News to those who are most in need of God's love.

Father Robert Maloney, Vincent's 22nd successor, offered an extensive commentary on Uniting Prayer and Action.

We are called to be contemplatives in action and apostles in prayer. Like St. Vincent, the founders of almost all apostolic societies were incredibly active men and women. But were there any among them who were not also known by their contemporaries as persons of deep prayer?

Prayer and action go hand in hand in a healthy Vincentian spirituality. Divorced from action, prayer can turn escapist. It can lose itself in fantasy. It can create illusions of holiness. Conversely, service divorced from prayer can become shallow. It can have a "driven" quality to it. It can become an addiction, an intoxicating lure. It can so dominate a person's psychology that his or her sense of worth depends on being busy.

An apostolic spirituality is at its best when it holds prayer and action in tension with one another. The person who loves God "with the sweat of his brow and the strength of his arms"<sup>59</sup> (SV XI, 40.) knows how to distinguish between beautiful theoretical thoughts about an abstract God and real personal contact with the living Lord contemplated and served in his suffering people.

Maybe Sr. Rosalie Rendu, DC got it right "Never have I prayed so well as in the streets"

Prayer starters

- **What balance of prayer and action do I see in my Vincentian Family heroes and heroines?**
- **What kind of balance do I have between prayer and action?**

