TWO UNPUBLISHED TEXTS CONCERNING THE DISTRIBUTION OF THE VINCENTIAN COMMON RULES, 1658

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The distribution of the Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission by Vincent de Paul is recounted by a secretary at the end of the conference of 17 May 1658. Two versions of these rules were prepared, one in Latin for the priests, and another in French for the lay brothers and seminarians. The founder distributed them to the priests in a simple but moving ceremony at the conclusion of the regular Friday conference. As the copyist noted, his confreres were overcome on that occasion. Vincent began the distribution with Monsieur Portail, his earliest companion, and then continued with Fathers Almeras, Becu, Gicquel and sixteen others. They approached him, knelt, and respectfully kissed the book, the hand of their superior general and then the ground. The founder, too, was overcome, acknowledging his unworthiness before his confreres as he imparted his blessing. The copyist concluded by saying, among other things, that those present felt as if they were the apostles, listening to Our Lord particularly during his farewell discourse.

For those living away from Paris who missed this founding event, Monsieur Vincent sent them the small rulebooks, as well as a circular letter written by his first assistant, René Almeras. Monsieur Vincent mentioned this circular letter in two surviving letters. In the first one, he wrote “I have had our printed rules sent to you. You will find there a little circular letter that should be signed by Monsieur Almeras. It contains some regulations about them.”

He also wrote to Edme Jolly: “You say that you have received our rule books, but not the circular letter containing the things to be observed in distributing them. This letter is from Monsieur Almeras and not from me. If you have not received it, I am sending it to you here.”

Vincent did not repeat what Almeras wrote, namely that, besides the books and the circular letter, he was also sending a copy of the conference referred to above on the occasion of the distribution of the rules to the priests in Paris.

Although Almeras’ letter is undated, these references in the writings of Saint Vincent and the date of the distribution to the brothers in the second text let us confidently assign a date to it between 30 July and 2 October 1658.

For reasons unknown, this letter of Monsieur Almeras has not yet been published. It appears only in one known copy, in Italian, preserved in the archives of the province of Turin. It is uncertain whether any French copies exist, but none has been located in the archives of the Mission, Paris. The reason may have been the transitory nature of this letter. It was probably read and then discarded, or at least copied in the book of community documents as called for in the Constitutions in the Codex Sarzana.
The second unpublished text comes from a small, undated manuscript book of the eighteenth century, judging from the handwriting, found in the archives of the Congregation of the Mission in Madrid. This manuscript contains some of the conferences of Saint Vincent in Spanish. At the conclusion of the first conference, folios 1-7, are a few lines that do not appear in the known text. These lines describe the distribution of the rules by René Almeras, 30 July 1658, to the lay brothers and the seminarians. The two points that Almeras recommended resemble those he included in his circular letter. Like that circular letter, these few lines have not been published.

This study follows the method of transcription, translation and commentary for the circular letter of Almeras, then for the additional comments in Spanish. In both transcriptions, the spelling and use of accents follows that of the manuscripts.

**TRANSCRIPTION I**

Con occasione che il Sigr. Vincenzo vi manda le nostre Regole stampate, mi è parso bene ragguagliarvi di quanto passò nella Conferenza, nella quale ce le distribui, e mandarvi il breve discorso fatto da lui alla Compagnia, il quale é molto efficace, e vi sarà di gran consolazione.

Io stimo che sarà molto a proposito 1°. Che faciate legger in commune il suddetto discorso prima di distribuire le Regole a quelli della vostra Casa per disporli a riceverle con maggior gusto, rispetto, e divozione. 2° Che distribuendole raccomandiate loro di custodirle bene, accio non si perdano, ne vengano in mano degli Esterni. A tal’effetto le tengano sempre in luogo sicuro, o in saccocia, ma non in quella, in cui si ripone il Fazoletto, affinché cavando fuora questo, non cadano in terra quelle. Il modo più sicuro sarebbe, che ciascuno avesse una saccocietta proporzionata alla grandezza del libro di dette Regole, nella quale non si tenesse altro. Gli ammonirete parimente, che non le lascino sopra Banchi, o Tavolini massimamente in Luoghi pubblici, o frequentati da altro; al che faranno special avvertenza i nostri Fratelli Laici, i quali sogliono esser più affaccendati, e che più spesso escano di casa.

3° Che notiate i nomi di quelli, a quali le avrete distruibuite, e vi concetiate di mandarne la Nota a S. Lazaro, acciocché quelli, che le averanno avute, e verranno quà, non ne possano chieder un’altro esemplare.

4° Vi si mandano alcuni esemplari sopra il numero de’soggetti della vostra Casa, quali procurarete di conservare diligentemente sotto chiave per servirvene in caso di bisogno.

5° Se accaderà che alcuno dopo averne ricevuto un’esemplare venga a perderlo, e ne chieda un altra, se vi accorgete che egli sia trascuro in custodirlo, e sospettiate, che sia per farne presente a qualche amico esterno, sarà bene risponderli, che ne scrivereete al Superiore Generale per averne degli altri, e per sapere da lui, se si contenta che se ne diano a chi una volta le ha perse.

6° Che non ne diate se non a quelli, che hanno finiti li due anni di seminario, si Fratelli Laici, come Chierici, essendosi così praticato in questa Casa, perche non essendo quelli ancora del Corpo della Congregazione, e per conseguenza meno sicuri della perseveranza, potrebbero portarle via quando uscissero di Congregazione. Ma si potrà dar loro notizia di esse, leggendole
di quando in quando pubblich. te alla menza [sic] perche così si userà in questa Casa per i seminaristi, si chierici, come laici.

7° Le Lattine [sic] sono per i Sacerdoti, e Chierici, e le volgari per i Fratelli Laici.

Vi supplico umilmente di scusare la libertà che prendo di darvi queste minute avvertenze, essendosi giudicato così convenire.

TRANSLATION I

Since Monsieur Vincent is sending out our printed Rules, it seemed a good idea to me to report to you about what happened in the conference during which he distributed them to us, and then to send you the brief discourse that he gave to the Company. This was very effective, and it will console you greatly.

I think that it will be very a propos: 1° to have this discourse read in common before distributing the rules to the members of your house, to dispose them to receive them with greater appreciation, respect and devotion.

2° When you distribute them, you should recommend that they guard them carefully so as not to lose them, or have them come into the hands of externs. For this reason, they should also keep them in a safe place, or in their pocket, but not in the pocket where they have their handkerchief. The book might fall to the ground when they take their handkerchief out. The safest way would be for each one to have a little cover of the same size as the rulebook. There should be nothing else in it. You should likewise warn them not to leave them in the pews or on tables, especially in public areas, or those areas frequented by others. In this matter, our lay brothers should pay special attention, since they are accustomed to bustle around more and to leave the house frequently.

3° You should take note of the names of those to whom you have distributed them, and take care to send the list to Saint Lazare, so that those who have already received them might not come here and be able to ask for another copy.

4° You are being sent several copies more than the number of the members of your house. You should try to keep them diligently locked up for use in case of need.

5° Should someone lose his copy after receiving it and ask for another, you should check whether he might have failed to keep track of it. If you suspect that he might have presented it to some extern friend, it would be good to answer him that you will write about it to the superior general to get others, and to learn from him whether he agrees that someone who once lost his copy should be given another.

6° You should give them only to those who have finished the two years of their seminary, whether lay brothers or clerics, as has been done in this house.² The reason is that they are not yet part of the body of the Congregation, and consequently are less sure to persevere, and might take them away when they leave the Congregation. But they can be informed about them, by
reading them from time to time publicly at table, as is done in this house for the seminarists, both clerics and lay.

7° The Latin rules are for the priests and clerics, and those in the vernacular are for the lay brothers.

I humbly beg you to excuse the liberty I take in giving you these minute details, but they have been deemed very important.

**COMMENTARY I**

First, surprisingly, the letter says nothing about Vincent de Paul, apart from mentioning his conference. Almeras characterizes the conference in very modest terms: brief, effective, consoling. In so doing, perhaps he was following the injunction of the Common Rules themselves, which spoke against complimenting a member on his preaching (12:4).

Second, Almeras spent most of his time dealing with guarding the rulebook itself, and keeping it from getting into the hands of others. In this, he was perhaps commenting on Common Rules 9:8, which begins “No one shall make known our Rules or Constitutions to persons outside the Community without the express permission of the Superior General or the Visitor.” The reason why the rules were to be kept secret is, however, not explained. Indeed, one might think that the two paragraphs of Common Rules, chapter 12 (numbers 13 and 14) which speak of venerating them and of having of copy to read regularly, might lead the members to want to share them with others because of their pride in them.

Third, a notable lack of Vincentian simplicity is evident in paragraph 5. In this, Almeras advises the superior to think, lacking other explanations, that the confrere had given the book to a friend, an extern. The response is devious at best: the superior, who already has a supply of extra books kept under lock and key to use when needed (paragraph 4), is to say that he will write to the superior general himself to see what is to be done with a confrere so unfortunate as to lose his copy. The mere thought of contacting Monsieur Vincent himself in the matter seems to apply sufficient moral pressure to guard the book carefully.

Fourth, Almeras cited the customs of the Paris motherhouse, Saint Lazare, as normative for other houses (paragraph 6). In centuries to come, this practice led to many difficulties between France and other countries as they grew and developed.

Lastly, since the majority of the confreres were priests or clerics studying for the priesthood, the majority of the rulebooks were printed in Latin for them. Consequently, the original printing of the French version of the rules is extremely rare.

**TRANSCRIPTION II**

*Los sacerdotes que recibieron las reglas eran 20.*
En el martes 30 de julio de 1658, al fin de la obed[ien]cia acostumbrada despues de la recreación el S[eñor] Almeras como asistente de S[anto] Vicente, distribuyó d[ie]has reglas á los H[erman]os. Coadjut[ores], en número de 23; estampadas en Frances; y dixo q[ue] á los H[erman]os. Seminaristas solo se leerían d[ie]has reglas en el seminario antes de haver oïdo su lectura q[ue] quizà se haría en comun en el refectorio, empezando desde la siguiente mañana y no quiso que los H[erma]nos. las recibieran de él arrodillados. Despues les encomendo dos cosas. 1º q[ue] el libro de las reglas no saliera de su faltriquera sino para pasar á sus manos para llerlas y despues de las manos á la faltriquera, de modo q[ue] siempre las llevassen consigo. 2º de leerlas con atencion y poco cada vez.


TRANSLATION II

The priests who received the rules numbered 20.

On Tuesday, 30 July 1658, at the end of the regular chapter after recreation, Father Almeras, as the assistant of Saint Vincent, distributed the rules printed in French to the lay brothers, who numbered 23. And he said to the brother seminarians that they should read the rules in the seminary only after having heard them read, which should perhaps be done in common in the dining room, beginning the next day. He did not want the brothers to receive them from him while kneeling. Afterwards, he recommended two things to them. First, that the rule book not leave its case except when they take it to read it and then put it back into its case, so that they should always keep them on their person. Second, that they should read them carefully, but only a little at a time.

The names of the priests who received the rules from the holy Father on the night of their distribution were Fathers Portail, Becu, Bonches, Almeras, Bourdet, Perrault, Grimal, Berchel, Admirault, Darchin, Cruoly, Coghs, Mailard, Langrosí, Cornuel, Bourdin, Gicquel, Eveilard, Dela Briere, Le Vasseur.

COMMENTARY II

Since this text mentions “Saint Vincent,” it was obviously written after 1737, the year of his canonization. It appears to be a translation from an older work, probably in Italian, since the earliest Spanish materials came from Italy. In any case, the Spanish version preserves details formerly unknown, such as the name and number of priests present, and the date and manner of the distribution to the brothers (lay and clerical).

Almeras carefully specified that the distribution of the rules was not to repeat the moving ceremony that took place nearly three months previously between the founder and the priests. Consequently, Almeras chose a different time (after the recreation period), and a different
manner. Further, he specified that the brothers—the text does not distinguish carefully between lay brothers ("coadjutors") and clerical brothers ("seminarians")—should keep the rules with them but take them out of their case or cover only to read them. Even then, they were to read them only a little at a time, meditatively. These two points may be the germ of, or even an excerpt from, his circular letter.

The transcription of proper names is clearly defective in several cases. Their probable spelling, with dates of birth and vows, is given in the notes.

Coste, CED, 7:281, letter 2675, to Pierre Gabel, superior at Sedan, from Paris, 2 October 1658.

Coste, CED, 8:381, letter 2735, to Edme Jolly, superior at Rome, from Paris, 29 November 1658.


“When he receives some ordinances from the superior general intended for all, he shall see to it that they are communicated to the superiors and consultors of his visitation, and, if they are of some importance for their government and instruction, he shall see to it that they are copied in each house in the book designated for it.” (*Rules for the Visitor*, chapter 2, paragraph 3.)

I am grateful to the late Jose Maria Roman, C.M., for bringing this second text to my attention and for his thoughts on it, from which I have freely borrowed.

That is, on 30 July 1658.

Portail, Antoine, born 1590, vows 1642. The remaining names follow roughly the order of age or vows. The spelling of the names in the notes follows the more correct and accepted version.

Becu, Jean, born 1592, vows 1643.

Boucher, Leonard, born 1610, vows 1642; or Philippe-Ignace, born 1631, vows 1657.

Almeras, Rene, born 1613, vows 1640.

Bourdet, Jean, born 1614, vows 1643; or his brother Etienne, born 1615, vows 1648.

Perraud [his spelling] or Perault, Hugues, born 1615, vows 1644.

Grimal, Francois, born 1605, vows 1646.

Berthe, Thomas, born 1622, vows 1645.

Amirault, Charles, born 1622; vows 1642; or perhaps his brother Claude, born 1632, vows 1651.

Damiens, Gabriel, born 1621, vows 1642.

Crouly, Donat, born 1623, vows 1645.

Coglee, Marc, born 1614, vows 1649.

Maillard, Antoine, born 1618, vows 1646.

Langlois, Louis, born 1616, vows 1646.

Comuel, Guillaume, born 1621, vows 1646.

Bourdin, Jean, born 1624, vows 1653.

Gicquel, Jean, born 1617, vows 1651.

Eveillard, Jacques, born 1631, vows 1650.

La Briere, Nicolas de, born 1626, vows 1650.

Levasseur, Martin, born 1630, vows 1653.