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Vincentian Contributions to the New Evangelization

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1. Introduction

Convoked by the Superior General, Father G. Gregory Gay, C.M., the Congregation of the Mission will celebrate our forty-second General Assembly from June 27 to July 15, 2016. The theme of the Assembly is focused on the evangelizing nature of our “being” and our “doing”: *Let us allow ourselves to be renewed by the missionary vitality of our Vincentian vocation.* This theme connects us with the call for a new evangelization in which the whole Church is now involved. The General Assembly, among other things, has as its purpose: *to preserve and promote the spirituality and apostolic vitality of the Congregation* (Constitutions, 135). The best thing that we can do is to reflect on a series of fundamental questions concerning our present and future, questions that are based on our present day mission in the Church. I will summarize all of these questions into one: What can and what should we, as Vincentians, contribute to the new and urgent process of evangelization?

2. Evangelization, the task of all Christians

I want to make it clear that we are reflecting on the question of whether, as Vincentians, we have something to say about this universal process of evangelization. Clearly there is an urgency about evangelization which is a ministry and a universal command that is imposed on the whole church. Pope Paul VI in his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, tell us: “*Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize*” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, #14).

Therefore, we cannot speak about a “Vincentian evangelization” as such because this vast area of evangelization involves all Christians. Evangelization is a task that involves the whole Church. It is the Church’s fundamental task, *the* reason for her being Church. The rainbow is a combination of various colors; therein lies its beauty. It has no one specific or dominant color; rather all the colors are equally represented. Thus each color contributes to the beauty of the whole reality of the rainbow. We could say then that we are attempting to find that color which is uniquely Vincentian, so that we can contribute to the beauty of the rainbow of evangelization.

3. Some clarifications with regard to the new evangelization!

I am not going to enter into a discussion about the use of the word *evangelization* with or without the adjective. Personally, I believe the word has the same meaning with or without the adjective and therefore the word that is important is the noun *evangelization*. But we must also be mindful of the following. The new evangelization has two meanings:

- First of all, it obviously means that we must take up the process of evangelization anew, given the fact that secularization has disillusioned the West as its process of de-Christianization has spread. Gospel values, for example, love, unity, equality, solidarity, etc., have given way to new “secular” values, such as progress, efficiency, success, consumption. Although we continue to speak about Christian values, they are no longer rooted in our hearts.
- The new evangelization also means that we have to evangelize in anew, with fresh methods and new goals and strategies to avoid the errors of the past. The goal cannot be to re-establish Christianity, but rather must be the building up of the Kingdom of God. That task has nothing to do with the concern “to conquer the world,” but is all about a presence of witness in the midst of the world. We are not dealing with the baptism of a culture or a specific area, but we want to baptize those who believe, who want to accept and share the message of Jesus of Nazareth.
- We should also remember that Pope Francis in both his discourses and, recently *Evangelii Gaudium*, his apostolic exhortation, has continually stated that evangelization (or the new evangelization) has to place the church, the whole church, in a *state of mission*. The Church has to move out to the moral, material, geographical, existential and spiritual “*peripheries*”, and this evangelization must contain elements of dialogue, healing, hope and joy (*Evangelii Gaudium*, #20, 30, 46, 191).

Therefore, having said this, I will take up the challenge of highlighting some specific Vincentian elements or lines of action that will draw us closer to that which should be our genuine contribution to the process of the new and urgent evangelization.

4. General Framework of the Vincentian Mission

We have to begin with some background or a general Vincentian framework. On December 6, 1658, Vincent de Paul, in one of his conferences to the Missioners, spoke on the purpose of the Congregation of the Mission: [Our mission] “*is to make God known to poor persons; so as to announce Jesus Christ to them; to tell them that the kingdom of heaven is at hand and that it is for persons who are poor*” (CCD: XII: 71). For me, those words constitute the best summary of

our Vincentian character as regards evangelization. Those words also echo the ideas that Blessed Pope Paul VI proclaimed in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, the ground-breaking Church document on evangelization. This general framework ought to inspire, guide, and find expression in our evangelizing activities; it should also influence our attitudes and dispositions. This general framework gives us a central point of the Vincentian heritage: *God, Jesus Christ, and the poor*.

- ***The primacy of God:*** God is first and is absolute. We are the channels of God's goodness and mercy. As Vincent would say, the God that Vincentians have to proclaim is the God who is "*the protector of the poor*" (CCD: X: 411).
- ***The centrality of Christ:*** Vincent's life was Christ centered and his Christology was not theoretical but alive and existential. Clearly then, our Vincentian identity is Christ-centered. Therefore, our option for the poor can only be understood from the reality that the cause of the poor is the cause of Christ. Thus, we follow Christ and proclaim Jesus Christ, the evangelizer and the servant of the poor.
- ***Passion for the poor:*** We are not simply dealing with a concern for the poor or an act of drawing closer to the poor. Rather, we are exhorted to live the words that Vincent wrote to Monsieur Almeras on October 8, 1649: "*But where can the poor turn? Where can they go? This is my worry and my sorrow*" (ABELLY III: 117).

5. The binding thread of the Vincentian mission

The *general Vincentian framework* is sustained by a type of *binding thread* that gives unity and coherence to the Vincentian mission. We face the constant danger that our Vincentian spirituality, could become watered down and lose its strength and attractiveness to other ecclesial groups and spiritualities.¹

¹ 1. VINCENT DE PAUL, *Correspondence, Conference, Documents*, translators: HELEN MARIE LAW, DC (Vol. 1); MARIE POOLE, DC (Vol. 1-13b); JAMES KING, CM (Vol. 1-2); FRANCIS GERMОВNIK, CM (Vol. 1-8, 13a-13b [Latin]); ESTHER CAVANAGH, DC (Vol. 2); ANN MARY DOUGHERTY, DC (Vol. 12); EVELYNE FRANC, DC (Vol. 13a-13b); THOMAS DAVITT, CM (Vol. 13a-13b [Latin]); GLENNON E. FIGGE, CM (Vol. 13a-13b [Latin]); JOHN G. NUGENT, CM (Vol. 13a-13b [Latin]); ANDREW SPELLMAN, CM (Vol. 13a-13b [Latin]); edited: JACQUELINE KILAR, DC (Vol. 1-2); MARIE POOLE, DC (Vol. 2-13b); JULIA DENTON, DC [editor-in-chief] (Vol. 3-10, 13a-13b); PAULE FREEBURG, DC (Vol. 3); MIRIAN HAMWAY, DC (Vol. 3); ELINOR HARTMAN, DC (Vol. 4-10, 13a-13b); ELLEN VAN ZANDT, DC (Vol. 9-13b); ANN MARY DOUGHERTY (Vol. 11-12); annotated: JOHN W. CARVEN, CM (Vol. 1-13b); New City Press, Brooklyn and Hyde Park, 1985-2009. Future references to this work will be inserted into the text using the initials [CCD] followed by the volume number, followed by the page number, for example (CCD: XII: 71).

This binding thread is the *structure of diakonia* which is proper to the Vincentian charism. Here I am referring to *charity*, to the *service of charity*, to the *mission of charity*, to *diakonia* in its etymological sense of loving service. In *diakonia* we find the perfect union of charity, communion, service, mission and total self-giving. All the actions, thoughts and institutions of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac were motivated by and focused on charity as mission and mission as charity.

Vincent de Paul united affective and effective love as two realities that become one. They should be seen in the same light as the union between charity and mission (CCD: IX: 466, 467-468, 470-471). Vincent warned his followers that affective love without a commitment to the process of evangelization, that is, charity without mission, would, at the very least, be suspicious: *Let us love God, brothers, let us love God, but let it be with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows; for very often many acts of love of God, of devotion, and of other similar affections and interior practices of a tender heart, although very good and desirable, are, nevertheless, very suspect if they don't translate into the practice of effective love. "By this," says Our Lord, "is my Father glorified, that you may bear much fruit." We have to be very careful about that; for there are many who, recollected exteriorly, and filled with lofty sentiments of God interiorly, stop at that, and when it comes to the point of doing something, and they have the opportunity to act, they come up short* (CCD: XI: 32-33).

6. The agent of the Vincentian mission

In order for there to be a *Vincentian contribution to the new evangelization* there has to be Vincentian evangelizers, agents of the mission who are motivated by the Vincentian charism and by Vincentian spirituality. Therefore, it is good to outline the image of a Vincentian evangelizer and highlight the more important and fundamental aspects of this image.

- a) They are persons who have a profound experience of God and this means much more than being pious.
- b) They are persons who identify themselves with Christ, the evangelizer of the poor... they identify themselves in a manner similar to that which Vincent spoke about in his conference to the Mis-

2. LOUIS ABELLY, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul: Founder and First Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission*, 3 volume, edited by John E. Rybolt, CM; translated by William Quinn, FSC; notes by Edward R. Udovic, CM and John E. Rybolt, CM; introduction by Stafford Poole, CM; New City Press, New Rochelle, New York, 1993; future references to this work will be cited with the name Abelly, followed by the volume number and then the page number, for example, ABELLY III: 117.

sionaries: *The Son of God came to evangelize the poor. And are not we, Messieurs, sent for the same purpose?* (CCD: XI: 283-284).

- c) They are persons who are firmly convinced of sharing in the Vincentian vocation. They are nourished by Vincentian spirituality and give witness to this reality in their life.
- d) They are persons who make every effort to discern the will of God *in the signs of the time* and they read these *signs of the time* from the perspective of the needs and the situation of the poor, the marginalized, the helpless, the excluded...
- e) They are persons filled with zeal (a characteristic Vincentian virtue) and with everything that is implied in the process of evangelization, that is, they are bold and creative in order to open new paths for evangelization.
- f) They are people who feel the obligation and the urgency for ongoing formation. They are convinced that *formation in the service of evangelization* is a question of justice with regard to the poor who are to be evangelized.

7. The beneficiaries of the Vincentian mission

The *Instrumentum Laboris* of the Synod on the new evangelization also gave importance to a series of new situations or new areopaghi – where today evangelization is all the more necessary and urgent. It spoke of the vast area of culture, the phenomenon of migration, the media, the global economy, scientific and technological advances, civic life (#52-60).

At the same time, even though we might be aware of the following, it is nevertheless restated that consecrated individuals ought to be in the forefront of the mission: on the periphery with those who are most poor; in those places where the calls of the poor are most urgent; on the frontier where the church confronts new and difficult missionary problems and challenges that are found in the new situations of poverty, in the desert where the gospel is little known.

Applying this to the Vincentian evangelizer a series of questions arises: where do we put the emphasis in the process of evangelization? What are the new “areopaghi” that are our concern?

Are we in the forefront with regard to the mission or have we become accustomed to a pastoral style that is sacramental and focused on preserving and maintaining the faith? Are we where we should be in relation to our charism and our spirituality? We can easily see the previous questions are related to what we refer to as the *beneficiaries* of evangelization, that is, those persons to whom our Vincentian mission is or ought to be directed. If we want to be specific about who are or should be the beneficiaries of the process of Vincentian evangelization, then we could state the following.

- a) The poor, and here we speak about the poor in the fullest sense of the word *poor* and from the perspective of the true reality of *poverty*... thus we refer to everything from economic poverty to cultural, moral, psychological and social poverty. We must also include the new poverties that, as John Paul II states in his encyclical, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, are always being fabricated by *evil mechanisms* and by the *structures of sin* (#40).
- b) Those who are in need of Christian formation and spiritual attention and who are also poor... and who because of this need are the most poor. Pope Francis speaks about this in his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii gaudium: The worst discrimination which the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care. The great majority of the poor have a special openness to the faith; they need God and we must not fail to offer them his friendship, his blessing, his word, the celebration of the sacraments and a journey of growth and maturity in the faith* (*Gaudium Evangelii*, #200). We must be careful here with the way in which people are classified as spiritually poor.
- c) The poor whom no one reaches out to and whom no one wants to provide for. In other words, those persons who are not even viewed as statistics with regard to poverty and misery and social marginalization... those who have lost their visibility and whom no one is concerned about making visible.

8. The Vincentian message (some elements from the perspective of the Vincentian charism)

We, as Vincentians, can contribute some of the elements that are derived from our proper charism and spirituality. I am going to point out four elements within the universal message of evangelization.

- a) The living and true God revealed by Jesus Christ – if we look at the gospel we discover that we are dealing with *the God who is good*, that is, God as Father, as love, as mercy, as infinite forgiveness, as protector and defender of the poor.
- b) Jesus Christ as savior and liberator: Jesus Christ, incarnated, who became the least of all, the servant of all, who serves us through his life and death and resurrection; Jesus Christ who presents himself as the Messiah anointed by the Spirit in order to free the captives and the poor, to break the bonds that enslave people and to proclaim good news to the poor (Luke 4:16-19).
- c) Charity, which is the fundamental element of our life as believers; affective and effective love which is the life-giving center of the believer and the ultimate proof of faith. Saint Paul told the Galatians: *For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircum-*

cision counts for anything, but only faith working through love (Galatians 5:6).

d) The poor as *the sacrament of Christ* (Matthew 25:31-46) and as *our lords and masters*. This element is very Vincentian.

9. Fundamental attitude and some Vincentian criteria!

In other words what are some of the ways that a Vincentian can collaborate in the Church's evangelizing process... and collaborate from the perspective of his identity?

a) *The missionary spirit as a basic attitude*

On various occasions Pope Francis has used a word that is not very common in our pastoral vocabulary... I refer to the word *missionary spirit* which implies an attitude that infuses our whole life, that gives meaning to our Christian and our ecclesial life and that guides all our evangelizing activity... an attitude that goes beyond mere acts or missionary programs. This attitude, this missionary spirit, is a constitutive element of the charism, the spirituality and the best Vincentian tradition.

b) *Vincentian criteria for the process of evangelization*

I call these Vincentian criteria because they are an integral part of the Vincentian charism and because they give life to the Vincentian charism that Vincent has passed on to us.

- A clear and expressed preference for the apostolate among the poor, or what is the same, a convinced and convincing option for the evangelization of the poor. Without this criterion everything else fades into the background (Constitutions, #12.1).
- Involvement in and attention to the human reality, especially the painful reality of the victims of the system (Constitutions, #12.2).
- Recover an incarnational spirituality: we cannot have mission without Incarnation and inculturation.
- Communion with the poor: this implies a true knowledge of their problems and their needs, an authentic encounter and an acceptance of them, a true participation in their hardships, sensitivity to and respect of their rights...
- Integral evangelization, with words and actions: Vincent de Paul stated: *If there are any among us who think they are in the mission to evangelize poor people but not to alleviate their sufferings, to take care of their spiritual needs but not their temporal ones, I reply that we have to help them and have them assisted in every way, by us or by others... that is to preach the Gospel by words and by*

works and that is the most perfect way; it is also what our Lord did (CCD: XII: 78).

- To promote, to accompany and to form the laity, especially in those matters regarding the Vincentian charism, Vincentian spirituality and the Vincentian mission.
- To form and be formed in the Social Doctrine of the church so that this becomes a living and actual revelation of the Vincentian spirit.
- Promote the idea that we refer to today as *a shared mission* in the midst of and with the Vincentian Family.
- To look anew at popular missions and to do this with boldness, creativity, a new imagination and with enthusiasm. This is one of the signs of the evangelizing identity of Vincentians.
- Organize charity in such a way that it is highlighted in our evangelization centers. This is an element of our Vincentian heritage that we should not lose sight of. Vincent de Paul recommended that a Confraternity of Charity be established in every place where a popular mission was preached... those confraternities became the visible fruit of the evangelizing activity.
- Apply the methodology of systemic change. Pope Francis states: *from the heart of the Gospel we see the profound connection between evangelization and human advancement, which must necessarily find expression and develop in every work of evangelization (Gaudium Evangelii, #178).* This means that the process of systemic change is a Vincentian criteria as we engage in the process of evangelization.

10. Conclusion

To evangelize from the perspective of a commitment toward the poor and with a vision that charitable service is one of the most genuine characteristics of Vincentian evangelization... this is indeed our best contribution to the new evangelization. From this Vincentian perspective the option for the poor becomes the fundamental focus of the new evangelization.

Editor's Note:

This article is a summary of a much longer and more fully developed article that can be read in: *Anales de la Congregación de la Misión y de las Hijas de la Caridad*, #2, March-April 2014, pp. 167-182.

See also: <http://famvin.org/es/2014/01/18/aportes-vicencianos-a-la-nueva-evangelizacion/> and <http://somos.vicencianos.org/blog/aportes-vicencianos-a-la-nueva-evangelizacion/>