

God's Mercy and the Vincentian Charism

By: Mario Di Carlo, C.M.

1. General elements with regard to mercy

Here we refer to those elements that will enable us to question our Vincentian experience. If *mercy* is God's proper name, then we must place ourselves before mercy with an attitude of contemplation: wonder and awe at being surprised by the irruption of God into our lives. Other essential attitudes then follow: celebration, proclamation, invocation, living in a way that enables one to be a witness of mercy, as well as a servant of mercy (mindful, above all else, of the ministry of reconciliation).

2. Saint Vincent and the jubilee: his experience and teaching

Vincent lived distinct moments of jubilee of a universal, as well as a local character. Vincent also explained (especially to the Daughters) the meaning of the jubilee and the conditions necessary to obtain the benefits of the jubilee.¹ Aware of the true significance of conversion that is demanded by the jubilee and understood, as stated in the Bull of Pope Francis, as overcoming our attachment to sin, Vincent [CCD:X:196, "and to love God alone"] stated that it was clear that people had not taken advantage of the opportunity that was presented by the jubilee since its purpose had not yet been accomplished (cf. CCD:IX:479).

With regard to Vincent's teaching, we can say that the theme of *mercy* was at the center of his *preaching*. He was always attentive to presenting the paternal and merciful face of God. In the background, we must be mindful of those who have stated that Vincent preached just one sermon, a sermon on the love of God, a sermon that was

¹ *Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, translated and edited by Jaqueline Kilar, DC; and Marie Poole, DC; et al; annotated by John W. Carven, C.M.; New City Press, Brooklyn and Hyde Park, 1985-2014; volume IX, pp. 38-43, 479-490; volume X, pp. 186-196; 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:IX:38-43, 479-490; X:186-196.

worked and reworked and that took on many different forms. In other words, it is clear that Vincent understood the heart of the gospel as well as the needs of the people of the 17th century, who lived in constant fear and needed to be calmed and consoled. With the establishment of the Congregation, we see the coming together of several events. First, we can say that the origin of the Congregation was not only the result of a confession (the confession of the dying man in Folleville), but was also the result of the preaching of the sermon on 25 January. The Lucan text of 4:18-22 in which we find Jesus preaching in the synagogue of Nazareth refers to *a year acceptable to the Lord* and unites the gestures of the God of mercy (healing) to the good news of God that saves. This text has been constituted as a point of reference for every experience of jubilee.

There is another relationship that should also be mentioned. Pope Francis has made the benefits of the jubilee available not only to those who pass through the Holy Doors of the Roman Basilicas, but also to those who pass through the doors of many other churches and shrines, and not only that. He has further stated that the doors of many other places in the city can also be utilized, the doors of hospitals and prisons. Vincent, when speaking about the visits that the Daughters made to the infirm and the elderly stated: *you, Sisters, can visit the churches while making your rounds visiting the poor ... since the service you render to persons who are poor is also rendered to Him* (CCD:IX:488). The same universal and local dimension of the jubilee places demands on two aspects of the Vincentian mission. Let us listen here to Vincent as he speaks to the Sisters about their form of service: *So then, Sisters, nurse those poor patients with great charity and gentleness so that they may see that you're assisting them with a heart filled with compassion for them* (CCD:X:445). *Compassion* not sentimentalism and that compassion should reflect the manner in which God acts on behalf of all men and women: the joining together of *effective and affective love*.

3. The Sacrament of Reconciliation and Us

The sacrament of Penance, general confession, forgiveness, reconciliation, all of which are required elements for the jubilee, should not only be part of our doctrinal language, but should also be part of our missionary ministry. We have a many faceted relationship with the sacrament:

- Above all else, we are the beneficiaries of the sacrament. We ought to question ourselves about the quality of our sacramental experience, not only the frequency with which we participate in this sacrament, but also the motives behind our participation in the sacrament. In other words, we are challenged to go beyond our customary manner of participation in order to discover *the joy of the encounter*, which in turn enables us, in the words of the Papal Bull *Misericordiae Vultus*, to revive the call to true conversion and to the renunciation of every attachment to sin. Therefore, are we satisfied with our manner of confessing? Do we receive spiritual strength to continue our journey through life?
- After we have been constituted as ministers and, even more, after we have been constituted as *Vincentians*, we are bound to the ministry of confession by vocation and by mission and by the very origin of the Congregation. It is a service, a weighty service, but also a beautiful service because it enables people to encounter the Lord. Because this is a service that has been entrusted to us, we should never lord it over others. We ought to be faithful to the command that we have received and should not give in to the temptation of exaggerated rigidity (the Pope reminds us not to transform the confessional into a tribunal or a torture chamber) or some form of laxity (look at the examples that have recently been placed before us: Saint Pio of Pietrelcina and Saint Leopoldo Mandic). We are invited to be merciful ministers who follow the example of Jesus as he condemned sin but expressed forbearance toward sinners.
- We must become *credible witnesses*. In other words, what we teach and what we celebrate in the name of the Church, we should also practice in our personal lives. In that way we reveal to people that we believe in the reality of the sacrament, that we participate in the sacrament, thus living the message of joy and revealing authentic signs of true conversion and detachment from sin. Here we refer to *two closely related aspects* of the sacrament:
 - *Forgiveness*: affirming the reality that we need forgiveness and that we cannot forgive ourselves, we ought therefore to give witness to the fact that we stand before a gift that is the fruit of the God's gracious initiative: God never ceases to forgive us while often we become weary of asking for forgiveness and weary of forgiving. Therefore, do we experience the need for forgiveness and in what ways do we

prolong in our life the experience of forgiveness? In being “pardoned” do we become true instruments and witnesses of forgiveness? Furthermore, if we are “pardoned” and continually “saved and redeemed,” then we ought to live and express the reality of forgiveness as an evangelical lifestyle.

- *Reconciliation*: reconciled by God and with God we experience the need of living that reconciliation within the Church, in our community, with our confreres, with everyone whom we encounter, with all of creation (cf. # 1469, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*). If sin is “division, rupture, and contraposition,” then reconciliation ought to lead us to rebuild what has been destroyed. We ought to move from the construction of walls to the building of bridges, thus prolonging in our daily lives the reality of our relationship with God.

We know that in the history of the Church, the Sacrament of Reconciliation has undergone radical changes and we have still not found a definitive solution. However, this does not eliminate the need for forgiveness, especially since we are most aware of the reality of sin. Since we are called to explain the reality of the sacrament to the faithful, we ought to discover for ourselves the richness of this gift and this means of grace that has been offered to us. In this way we will be ever more disposed *as ministers of God’s mercy*.

Continuing our reflection

- Let us read the three conferences that Vincent gave to the Daughters of Charity on “The Jubilee.” We will find there some very relevant elements.
- With regard to the sacrament of Reconciliation, we ought to attempt to discover its positive aspects: this will enable us to view the sacrament from the perspective of an encounter with the God of joy and consolation rather than as a burden.
- We should avoid the attitude of the Scribes and Pharisees who murmured against Jesus when he forgave the paralytic and cured him of his paralysis. We should rejoice at the fact that God’s mercy is extended to everyone.
- *Let us become merciful as the Father is merciful* (cf. Matthew 5:7) in order to receive and rejoice in the mercy that is promised in the beatitudes.

Translated: Charles T. Plock, C.M.