

## 1617 – 2017 Some Hopes for the Vincentian Family at the Dawn of its Fifth Century

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I love these lines from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*:<sup>1</sup>

*There is a tide in the affairs of men,  
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;  
Omitted, all the voyage of their life  
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.  
On such a full sea are we now afloat,  
And we must take the current when it serves  
Or lose our ventures.*

The tide on which our Family is sailing has been steadily rising. We have become a huge international faith-based group. Even as early as 1645, Saint Vincent could hardly believe how his Family had grown.<sup>2</sup> Now, as our fifth century dawns, over a million people identify themselves as Vincent's followers. They live and labor among the marginalized in more than 150 countries. In the last 25 years, our Family has become more and more conscious of being a worldwide organization. We have developed a seminal administrative structure, the Vincentian Family Executive Committee, and initiated common projects, like the Vincentian Family Haiti Initiative. In 2015, we established a new International Vincentian Family Office, to which a number of Commissions report.

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<sup>1</sup> *Julius Caesar*, Act 4, Scene 3.

<sup>2</sup> CCD:IX:165-166. CCD refers to the English translation of *Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, translated and edited by Jacqueline Kilar, DC; and Marie Poole, DC; et al; annotated by John W. Carven, CM; New City Press, Brooklyn and Hyde Park, 1985-2014; volume IX, pp. 165-166. On occasion, to fit the context, I have changed the translation slightly, in light of the original text.

One of Vincent's great gifts was that his vision crossed boundaries. His charism, and all the groups he founded, spread quickly to other countries. Wherever they went, he was eager for the Confraternities of Charity, the Congregation of the Mission, and the Daughters of Charity to work together. In fact, while each had its own structure and its own identity, he saw them all as having common roots, common goals, and even a common year of birth. He regarded them as the offspring of two experiences he had in 1617.<sup>3</sup> After Vincent's death, hundreds of other branches sprouted on the Family Tree.<sup>4</sup> Some, like the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, have flourished all over the world.

As the fifth century of our history begins, I ask myself how Vincent might direct his Family in responding to today's global challenges: systemic poverty; frequent economic and political failures in dealing with it; widespread religious indifference, but at times fanatical sectarian violence; immense waves of migration; urbanization coupled with homelessness; chronic diseases, some of which are quite preventable; and environmental havoc.

Vincent would surely promote local responses to these problems, initiatives based on charity and justice, but I suspect that, in this era of globalization, he would also focus his worldwide Family's energies on the larger issues of the day and the need for systemic change.

With over a million active members, the Family has the capacity to make a significant difference at a global level. To do that, we need accurate information about where we are, what we

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<sup>3</sup> José-María Román, "El año 1617 en la biografía de San Vicente de Paúl," *Vincentiana*, XXVIII, 1984, pp. 443-456.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Sister Betty Ann McNeil, *The Vincentian Family Tree: A Genealogical Study* (Vincentian Studies Institute, 1996).

are currently doing, and what those living in poverty are asking of us. Precise information will enable us to speak on the global stage with the authority that truth bestows and to plan about issues, like homelessness, health, and education, in which we are very much involved.

Decisive action also requires a supple structure, like the newly established International Vincentian Family Office, that will enable us to reflect on our experience and then recommend to the Executive Committee what issues to promote, what goals to set, and how to implement them. A well-functioning, collaborative, decision-making structure will allow us to integrate our efforts and have collective impact: listening to those whom society has marginalized, gathering data, bringing experts together, developing plans, organizing campaigns, influencing debate at a global level, working toward systemic change, and launching innovative projects.

With our Family's potential in mind, I offer these hopes as 2017 comes upon us.

### **MY HOPES FOR THE VINCENTIAN FAMILY AS ITS 5<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY DAWNS**

I express these hopes as someone who loves his Family and yearns to see it flourish. Most of the hopes apply to the Family as a whole, but, as the reader will soon see, some inevitably relate more to one branch than to another.

As this new era dawns:

- 1. I hope that we will continue to develop an organizational structure that will enable us to focus more effectively on the worldwide needs of those living in poverty.**

Over the last five years, a significant body of collective impact literature has developed.<sup>5</sup> Workshops on the topic abound, suggesting not just an abstract methodology for working together, but using successful collective impact projects to show what can happen if groups actually collaborate.

The methodology that emerges has five components:

- 1) a common agenda
- 2) shared measurement systems
- 3) mutually reinforcing activities
- 4) continuous communication
- 5) a backbone support organization

Over the last several years, our Vincentian Family has been developing a seminal collective impact structure through the meetings of its Executive Committee and the establishment of its International Office. My hope is that this organizational structure will continue to develop, so that the further hopes described below might come to fulfillment.

**2. I hope that we will soon map our worldwide membership in detail, so that, knowing who we are and where we are, we can plan as a Family more effectively.**

In recent years, in some parts of the world, branches that formerly had many members have diminished, as the number of sisters, brothers, and priests in those places has decreased. Other branches, like the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul and the Vincentian Marian Youth, have continued to grow and spread to new countries.

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<sup>5</sup> John Kania and Mark Kramer, "Collective Impact," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (Winter 2011), 36-41. Interestingly, the Collective Impact Forum announced on 21 July 2016, that it is shifting its goals so that its collective impact literature will focus more on systemic change. As is evident, this coincides with an increasingly important focus of the Vincentian Family.

But even those branches that have suffered numerical diminishment have undertaken some very positive initiatives. Over the last two decades, the Family has opened new works among the poor in El Alto in Bolivia, Punta Arenas in Chile, Albania, Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, Benin, Chad, Angola, the Central African Republic, Ghana, Libya, Tunisia, Sudan, continental China, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Alaska in the United States, and other places.

At present, the International Vincentian Family Office is engaged in “mapping” the worldwide Family by putting together a database that identifies who we are, where we are, and what we are doing, so that we can readily link with one another.

My hope is that, as the database develops, we will create a satellite map of the whole Family, so that we can connect with global information systems that will enable us to make informed decisions. Hundreds of information systems are already available online which can interface with a digital map of our Vincentian Family, enabling us to have detailed concrete information about where pockets of poverty exist all over the world and what factors exacerbate the situation. Comparing already existing databases with our own Family map, we will be able to see graphically where the poor are concentrated as well as related factors like educational level, employment, age, crime, disease, environmental conditions, etc.

**3. I hope that we will soon engage in a megaproject as a Family.**

Our Family has been focusing on systemic change since 2005. The International Commission for Promoting Systemic Change has offered numerous workshops throughout the world. It continues to work toward disseminating a systemic-change mentality, so that, more and more, it will reach down to the grassroots.

My hope is that, together as a Family, we will now launch a megaproject. The Executive Committee, after dialogue with the branches, would determine what that project might be. The list of possibilities is long:

- 1) Homelessness
- 2) Malaria
- 3) HIV/AIDS
- 4) Clean water
- 5) Other environmental issues
- 6) Migrants
- 7) Prison reform
- 8) ...

Here, let me offer an example of the resources that we already have for addressing just one of the topics listed above: homelessness (an enormous problem worldwide). Most of our branches touch the lives of the homeless in some way. One of the newest branches of the Family, Depaul International, which has rapidly spread from England to Ireland, Slovakia, Ukraine, the United States, and France, has homelessness as its specific focus. In collaboration with Depaul International and Community Solutions (another large program for confronting homelessness), DePaul University in Chicago has established an Institute of Global Homelessness, which is gathering the latest information on the topic and is bringing together experts to address it.

Could our Family set ambitious goals for eradicating homelessness? That is just one example. Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'* offers many other possibilities.

#### **4. I hope that we will educate and form our members well.**

Over the years, I have heard no request more frequently than the appeal for help in forming members of the various branches of our Family.

How important it is today to have well-educated members. The level of education in most societies is rising steadily. People long for a good education.

Happily, all our branches recognize that it is crucial for their members to have a well-grounded formation in the heritage of our Family. I suggest that many formation materials could be developed in common, while others pertaining to the particular charism of each group should be developed separately. Common materials might include:

- 1) brief, inspiring biographies of Saint Vincent, Saint Louise de Marillac, Frédéric Ozanam, and other key figures.
- 2) the key elements in Vincentian spirituality
- 3) the social teaching of the Catholic Church
- 4) systemic-change methodology
- 5) collaboration and collective impact
- 6) ...
- 7) ...

Each branch will then determine what particular formation needs it has at this time in its history. For example, my own branch, the Congregation of the Mission, might focus on:

- 1) ministry to new forms of poverty (e.g., migrants)
- 2) methods of preaching and teaching well
- 3) learning languages
- 4) new formulae and new methodologies for forming the clergy and lay people to be servants of those living in poverty.

Might the Congregation of the Mission “re-invent” its role in helping the diocesan clergy in its formation? Can we make a comeback in that regard? There are positive signs already in Poland, Colombia, Rwanda, Kenya, India, Indonesia, the Solomon Islands, and Papua

New Guinea. Sometimes a few vital centers of priestly formation can have an enormous impact, as is the case with the Sulpicians, who are very small in number (fewer than 300 worldwide), but who have a significant influence in the formation of the diocesan clergy.

**5. I hope that we will develop ways of speaking with a united voice on key issues at the United Nations.**

As a Family, do we speak with one voice? The Congregation of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity, the Charity Federation, the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, and AIC are all present at the United Nations in New York and Geneva. Might their efforts be more fully coordinated? In conjunction with the international leaders of the Family, could they agree to focus on several common themes, in addition to particular themes that might interest each branch? At the UN, we have the opportunity to serve as advocates for those living in poverty throughout the world, raising our voice in a united cry on their behalf.

As a faith-based organization with well over a million members, we are considerably larger than many NGOs and other groups represented at the United Nations. Our representatives at the United Nations in New York and Geneva are experienced, articulate people. Our potential as a “peaceful army” in the service of the poor is enormous.

Do we use our voice effectively? Does our worldwide membership know about the issues we focus on globally as a Family? Does each country or region or province have liaison persons and/or Commissions of Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation that communicate back and forth with the UN representatives, sending information to New York and Geneva and channeling information from the UN to local members of the various branches? What are the key issues that we want to speak about at the UN, with and for the poor?

## **6. I hope that the Family will continue to develop a vibrant communal spirituality.**

Each branch has its own accents in spirituality. This has been evident from the beginning of the Family's history and is clear today as one reads the Constitutions or Rules of each branch. This diversity is healthy and enriching.

But we also share in common a rich spirituality. Here, let me accent five of its elements. It is a spirituality:

### 1) that blends prayer and action

Writing to a priest of the Congregation of the Mission in 1657, Saint Vincent held up as central what he called "*two virtues of Jesus, his filial relationship with the Father and his charity toward the neighbor.*"<sup>6</sup> He regarded a combination of prayer and action as indispensable.

Over the years, I have known many members of the Family who, as individuals, combined prayer and action in a wonderful way. At the same time, I have often wished that our prayer together as a Family were more consistently beautiful. Beauty attracts those of all ages and conditions: younger and older, richer and poorer, men and women, clergy, religious and lay. Do people say of us: "Wow! When the Vincentian Family prays, its prayer is really beautiful!"

### 2) that is wholly Christocentric

Repeatedly, Vincent emphasized the centrality of Christ. In writing rules for the groups he founded, he urged them to see the face of Christ in the face of the poor. He asks them to

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<sup>6</sup> CCD:VI:413; cf. (French text) SV VI, 393: « les deux grandes vertus de Jésus-Christ, c'est à savoir la religion vers son Père et la charité vers les hommes. »

imitate the virtues of Jesus, especially his simplicity, humility, and love for the impoverished and for sinners. He encourages them to meditate on the “mysteries” of Jesus: the events of his life, death, and resurrection. He told his longtime friend, Father Portail: *“Remember, we live in Jesus Christ through the death of Jesus Christ, and we die in Jesus Christ through the life of Jesus Christ. Our life must be hidden in Jesus Christ and filled with Jesus Christ. In order to die as Jesus Christ, we must live as Jesus Christ.”*<sup>7</sup>

3) that makes simplicity central

Vincent stated explicitly that simplicity is *“my gospel.”*<sup>8</sup> He called it *“the virtue I love most.”*<sup>9</sup> He emphasized two aspects of simplicity especially: simplicity in lifestyle and simplicity in speech. He urged all his initial foundations – the Confraternities of Charity, the Congregation of the Mission, and the Daughters of Charity – to make simplicity a central value in their lives.

4) that is grounded in humility

There is no virtue about which Saint Vincent spoke so eloquently as he did about humility. He stated that it is *“the foundation of all evangelical perfection, the core of the spiritual life.”*<sup>10</sup> He wanted us to regard the impoverished as *“our Lords and Masters.”*<sup>11</sup> He emphasized listening *“to the least of my brothers and sisters”*<sup>12</sup> and collaboration with one another.

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<sup>7</sup> CCD:I:276.

<sup>8</sup> CCD:IX:476.

<sup>9</sup> CCD:I:264.

<sup>10</sup> Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission II, 7.

<sup>11</sup> CCD:XI:349.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 25:40.

5) that expresses itself in creative charity

One of the most cited sayings of Vincent is “*Love is creative, even to infinity.*”<sup>13</sup>

The context for this statement is different from what we usually imagine. When Vincent used this phrase, he was speaking of Jesus’ creativity in instituting the Eucharist.

Still, the phrase is readily applicable to Vincent himself and to his followers. In response to events, Vincent showed a remarkable freedom. He devised new solutions and created new institutions to deal with the ongoing problems of the marginalized and abandoned.

Vincent identified all five elements above as essential to a healthy spirituality. He was deeply convinced of their importance. In fact, he stated that, without them, we would cease to exist as a Family.<sup>14</sup>

**7. I hope that we will establish national and international advancement offices.**

Where are benefactors like Madame de Gondi today? Where is Queen Anne of Austria? Where are the stagecoach routes that provided Vincent with consistent revenues?

Some branches and, within them, parts of branches, have developed sources of revenue that assure the sustainability of their works. But, if the international Family is to pursue common goals, some common sources of funding will be necessary. Funding agencies, too, will respond more readily to proposals for collaborative projects submitted jointly by several branches than to proposals made by

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<sup>13</sup> CCD:XI:131.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Robert P. Maloney, “The Company Will Cease to Exist Unless ...,” *Vincentiana* 59, # 1 (2015), 43-57.

separate branches. Could advancement offices be established by the Vincentian Family both nationally and internationally?

The Western Province of the Congregation of the Mission in the United States has set a good example here. In 2004, it established a development office,<sup>15</sup> under Ms. Teresa R. Manna, that functions efficiently and effectively. It raises a considerable amount of money each year to support the province's mission in Kenya, the formation of its candidates, the care of its aging confreres, and its works among migrants and others living in poverty in the United States.

#### **8. I hope that we will develop the enormous potential of the International Miraculous Medal Association.**

Over the course of its history, the Miraculous Medal Association has played a very significant role in our Family's growth. The visions of Saint Catherine Labouré, and the medal and youth groups that flowed from Mary's message to her were a powerful force in revivifying the Family after its dispersion and diminution during the French Revolution.

In recent decades, the Miraculous Medal Association has written international statutes that clearly define its mission. The revised statutes, approved by the Holy See in 2010, describe the purpose of the Association as follows:

- 1) To follow Jesus Christ with the strength of the Holy Spirit and after the example of Mary, the disciple and model of the Christian life.
- 2) To honor and encourage devotion and commitment to the Virgin of the Miraculous Medal.

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<sup>15</sup> The terminology used to describe such an office varies considerably from one culture to another: development office, advancement office, fund-raising office, etc.

- 3) To spread Marian devotion through the message of the Miraculous Medal.
- 4) To encourage the sanctification of its members through union with each other, the spiritual life and the apostolate.
- 5) To evangelize and serve: the ways of exercising the apostolate are multiple.

Traditionally, the Miraculous Medal Association in many countries has carried out its apostolate with the family, for example, visiting homes or spreading the message through magazines, popular publications, personal contact, or mailed material. The service of charity is exercised by means of projects undertaken on behalf of those who live in poverty and carried out with other branches of the Vincentian Family or by themselves. Each National Miraculous Medal Association engages in both evangelization and service according to the ways that appear to them to be most effective.<sup>16</sup>

The Association is huge and very loosely structured. One can only guess at its total membership, which seems to be somewhere between one and two million devoted Catholics. Has the Association fully realized its potential? In some countries, its members are active in carrying out the fifth aspect of its purpose, evangelization and service in collaboration with other branches. But in other countries, this aspect of the Association lies largely dormant. I sense that the International Association of the Miraculous Medal is a sleeping giant. I hope that it can soon be awakened.

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<sup>16</sup> General Statutes of the Miraculous Medal Association (2010), 7.1 - 7.5.

## CONCLUSION

In “The Phaedrus,” Plato describes how the winged soul soars. Flying higher and higher, it defies the laws of gravity that weigh us all down. From new heights, it sees beyond the daily boundaries that usually hem us in. It comprehends the unity of created reality. It penetrates to the depth of things, viewing them in a broader context that gives them new meaning. It loves with a love that is no longer restricted to one’s own small world, but that transcends a particular time and space, and that is free. It reaches out toward universal beauty, goodness, and wisdom, and seeks to recreate it.

Plato concludes: *And, therefore, the mind of the reflective person alone has wings; and this is just, for he or she is always, according to the measure of his or her abilities, clinging in recollection to those things in which God abides, and, in beholding which, He is what He is. And someone who employs aright these memories is ever being initiated into perfect mysteries and alone becomes truly perfect.*<sup>17</sup>

Saint Vincent was surely a winged soul. In the century ahead, will we too, as a Family, fly as he did?

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<sup>17</sup> Plato’s dialogue, “The Phaedrus,” can be found online at: <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/phaedrus.html>