

To Collaborate with the other members of the Vincentian Family

Final Document, Commitment NE 1

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I. Introduction

The General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission of 1998, which had as its theme: *The Vincentian Family in the world and the challenges for its mission on the threshold of the third millennium*, arrived at five commitments for each one of us, for our local communities and for our provinces. The first one speaks to us about collaboration with the other members of the Vincentian Family. We will treat that theme in this article.

These commitments are already concrete, but I think it's important that we raise a few questions, above all if we are thinking of putting them into practice: Why talk about collaboration with others? What is the goal of this collaboration? How can we collaborate? In practice what would be the actions that manifest this collaboration?

I will try to highlight some answers to these queries. I do that starting from the experience of collaboration which has already gone on and certain possibilities that can be seen on the horizon. All of this presents itself as a challenge for our mission as it faces the third millennium.

I will present four short sections: the first, on the goal of collaboration; the second, on some concrete ways of collaborating; the third, a word about the creation of structures for collaboration; lastly, a short conclusion.

II. Why Collaboration?

A reading of the first commitment will tell us that collaboration has a very concrete goal which is to join forces, resources, possibilities and means in order to achieve together and more efficiently our evangelizing service of the poor, taking as a given that all of the Vincentian Family has been called to this end: Evangelizing and serving the poor in whatever time, circumstances or situation.

It is both healthy and Christian, moreover, to begin by recognizing our limitations, capabilities and possibilities and, because of that, we seek to join with others to become a

common force and a witness of the Church and Vincentian Family that make present the love of God for the unprotected of this world.

We seek unity with others, that is with lay Christians who have also assumed the Vincentian charism as a concrete way of living their faith and following Jesus , evangelizer of the poor. In the poor they find Jesus and serve him. We know, then, that by joining our forces we will have an immense potential for the evangelization and service of the poor.

When we recognize our limitations, we are called to change our hearts; or better, to let God=s grace change them. We are familiar with St. Vincent=s words: *The poor evangelize us*. This was not only a phrase for him, but a profound belief in God=s presence and voice manifested in the poor.

The final document of our last General Assembly says: *As members of the Congregation of the Mission we recognize the need for a change of heart in order to collaborate generously with the other members of the Vincentian Family*. This leads us to be humble and accept that our heart needs a change in order to understand how to serve the poor. The call to conversion is in knowing how to listen to the poor and the laity with whom we share our vocation and our service. They evangelize us and give us lights for the journey.

Christian conversion brings us to live and proclaim God=s Kingdom. Like Jesus and with Jesus, we have been called to extend the Kingdom of God in this world. Living and proclaiming this Kingdom means spreading our charism to others. It means extending the arms and the hearts of many so that they can manifest to the poor that God loves them and that this love becomes real in the works of justice and mercy which we undertake.

In short, collaboration with other members of the Vincentian Family brings us to serve the poor better, to renew our Vincentian vocation and charism, joining forces to go further and more efficiently in the effective construction of God=s Kingdom.

III. Concrete forms of collaboration

There are many possibilities for collaboration in the interaction among the different branches of the Vincentian Family. The assembly document itself gives us four concrete actions that are the basis or foundation for achieving an effective coordination with others. They are:

- mutual listening
- knowledge of the other branches of the Vincentian Family
- sharing experiences of service of the poor
- common prayer and reflection

We might ask ourselves: What have we done as a Congregation, as provinces, as local communities and as individuals in these four areas mentioned above? What still needs to be done? Without a doubt it's worthwhile to reflect seriously on our own experience and the experience of others who in different circumstances have taken the road of the Vincentian Family and can serve us as a guide and a stimulus.

The experiences of collaboration and the possibilities which still exist have begun and can begin on the different levels of our community, from the international to the local and individual levels.

The International Level

The Congregation of the Mission on the international level has taken some very concrete steps in showing an interest and collaborating in our growth as a family, both in formation and searching for works that might be a response to the urgent cries of the poor.

The doors of our last General Assembly were opened to allow lay people to enter and to introduce ourselves to them, giving them the floor with an receptive, listening attitude. Undoubtedly this was not only a new experience, but also a strong moment which helped us to know each other and pushed many delegates to look for this support and collaboration in their own countries.

At the beginning of this year, there took place in our general curia the Fifth Encounter of the heads of the different branches of the Vincentian Family. There were three days of work, in which there were moments of common prayer, time to share common concerns, plans and projects; finally ending with taking concrete commitments such as: a common Internet page, a book about Vincentian lay spirituality, maintaining communication...

When we share our projects of service of the poor and the experience of working with them; when we listen together to each others testimonies of service and commitment, we enrich each other, we enlighten each other and we are disposed to find and follow new roads in the face of the new poor and the new poverties which emerge in our society. Sharing ideas, plans and projects is the best way to be open and disposed to grow as persons in fidelity to our charism.

On the Provincial Level

Our provinces have also made a great effort to collaborate with lay people, especially with those who share our charism. The visitors in some provinces have organized courses in the seminaries about knowing the Vincentian Family. National Commissions of the Vincentian Family have been formed by the heads of each of the branches of the Vincentian Family with periodic meetings for information as well as formation. There have also been

projects of promotion in coordination with lay Vincentians for the service of the poor.

In some provinces they have created a center of Vincentian animation. In others they've formed a Vincentian formation team made up of members of the different branches whose mission is the animation and promotion of the charism. In some situations they've done acts of solidarity by economically supporting a project.

There are also some provinces where they have taken the initiative of inviting each other to their respective national assemblies; the same has been done on the international level through congresses and meetings with specific themes of common interest.

Service, whether in missions or houses for attending the poor, have been formed and reinforced with support from other branches of the Vincentian Family. There was a house of the Daughters of Charity which was about to close, but, thanks to information and dialogue between the different branches of the Vincentian Family, it was possible for that work to continue. The poor definitely make out better this way.

When we listen to one another, we are capable of discovering our riches as well as our weaknesses and faults; we can enrich the projects that we implement and organize for the poor. Some times one group will have the resources and others the need. On other occasions it will be the other way around. In this way a web of solidarity is established which ends up benefiting those who give and those who receive.

The Local Level

The initiative of praying as a united family has brought about many good results in different countries, regions and communities. The preparation and celebration of this common prayer has favored getting to know each other, formation and integration, including even the poor who have begun to participate in it. The common sharing of these moments has fostered mutual knowledge of the persons, the works and the services.

The consequences of this common prayer have been gestures of support and collaboration in a simple and everyday manner; mutual aid in assemblies and meetings for formation; formation material and resources for serving the poor have been shared and new lay people have been brought into the Vincentian Family. The list of these results would be very long. Everything flows from common knowledge, fraternal love and seeking after unity. St. Vincent's recommendation continues to be valid today: *Live in unity and God will bless you.*

The spiritual experience and the practice of Christian prayer sustain and give meaning to our commitment with the poor. People today look for guides and masters of prayer. On this level what do we offer the laity? What do they offer us? We need to find methods of prayer

that respond to the expectations of people today, especially young people; ways that lead us to an encounter with the God of the poor, the simple and the humble, the God who suffers the passion of Jesus, the God who invites us to an intimate, but not self-centered, prayer, the God who in the encounter moves us to express our entire life as love for the poor.

The moments of prayer have greatly fostered the strengthening of our vocation and the growing numbers of them, not only in our community, but also in the rest of the Vincentian Family. It's urgent and convenient that we open our local communities to share our prayer with the members of the Vincentian Family, especially with young people.

The Personal Level

The accompaniment and formation of the laity is an important part of our vocation as a Congregation. Therefore, the different branches of the Vincentian Family cannot be a reality apart or foreign to our priestly ministry, neither on the missions, nor in secondary schools and universities, nor the parishes. In this way our ministry as Vincentian missionaries will be touched by the reality of the laity.

St. Vincent used to say: *It's not enough for me to love God if my neighbor does not love him.* This was a conviction that dynamized his commitment. Paraphrasing him, we might say: *It's not enough to serve and evangelize the poor if my neighbor doesn't evangelize as well.*

Today the branches of the Vincentian Family have abundant documents about organization, spirituality, etc. A first step we might take is being interested in knowing the reality of these Vincentian lay people. Only in that way can we be prepared to love and serve them. Only in this way will we be able to work together for the needy.

A systematic and experiential knowledge of each branch of the Vincentian Family will lead us to live in an attitude of openness and frank collaboration with the other branches of the Vincentian Family. This knowledge will bring us to an awareness that we are, together with them, a richness and a transforming force capable of committing ourselves to the poor.

IV. Creating structures of collaboration

The General Assembly of 1998 had for its central theme collaboration with the Vincentian Family on the threshold of the third millennium, and in the line of creating structures to coordinate the mutual collaboration which is already going on or which will happen in the future. The Superior General, with his council, taking into account all of this, has thought it a good idea to have a delegate to the Vincentian Family. He will have as his mission sharing and respectfully promoting collaboration among the different branches of the Vincentian Family.

To continue, and bring to a close this section, I would like to mention possible actions which might be undertaken at the provincial and local levels:

1E Creating projects of initial and permanent formation with the other branches of the Vincentian Family, which will lead us to an updating of the Vincentian charism, e.g.: Vincentian spirituality, social documents of the Church, etc.

2E Creating or enabling webs of communication which will lead us to establish possibilities for mutual support, especially in times of emergency.

3E Fostering common projects which are destined for the service of the poor and mutual collaboration in the different works of the apostolate and service.

Could we do anything more? What other concrete collaborative actions could we take in our provinces and local houses? Our updated Vincentian charism is very valuable and urgently needed, what more can we do so that others can participate in it?

V. Conclusion

The laity have much to teach us from their own journey of faith and testimony of life. With the same attitude that Jesus had, we should approach them to listen humbly. They also possess the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth and light.

Two Convictions:

First. Ministry with lay people at the end of this second millennium is not something optional for us, but rather something urgent among our ministerial priorities. It pertains to the end of the Congregation of the Mission (C 1). It is an urgent task which requires not only an affective conviction, but also effective commitment.

Second. The third millennium will be the era of the laity. They will be the protagonists of announcing the evangelizing and missionary message. We have the great and beautiful mission of forming, animating and urging them to take on a role in society, building up the Kingdom of God in the world. Sharing our charism with them is the best way to reaffirm it and make it grow in ourselves.

Today we are no longer an isolated Congregation, but rather a united family which, as such, has no other goal than making itself present among the poor to discover together with them God's love, seeking roads of justice and love which will generate life.

(John P. Prager, C. M. translator)