

October 15, 1999

To the members of the Congregation of the Mission throughout the world

My very dear Confreres,

May the grace of Our Lord be always with you!

I hesitate to write about the Jubilee. So much has already been said. Pope John Paul II's *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* speaks eloquently of its meaning and suggests many practical means for celebrating it well. Almost every bishops' conference has organized a Jubilee Committee and published a document with a Jubilee plan. Many Visitors have told me that they are urging the confreres to integrate their own Jubilee activities with those of the local diocese so that, at this important time, the energies of Church groups can be channeled rather than dispersed.

But many have asked me to write. I do so today as a response to their requests. I will try not to repeat what others have already said, though I know that some repetition is inevitable. My focus in these reflections is on a *Vincentian* celebration of the Jubilee.

A JUBILEE SPIRITUALITY

As you know, St. Vincent chose a Jubilee text as the motto of the Congregation:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
therefore he has anointed me.
He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor,
to proclaim liberty to captives,
recovery of sight to the blind,
and release to prisoners,
to announce a year of favor from the Lord.*

(Lk 4:18-19)

Our mission, like that of Jesus, is to proclaim the Jubilee, "to announce a year of favor from the Lord." Today, let me propose, as undergirding for this mission, three aspects of a

Jubilee spirituality.

1. *Trust in Providence*

In the perspective of the Israelites, the Jubilee grew out of the sabbatical tradition. It was the sabbatical of sabbaticals (seven times seven years plus one), when fields were to lie fallow, slaves were to be emancipated, debts were to be relieved, and alienated property returned to its original owner. Though there is little evidence that these Jubilee regulations were put into practice systematically, they were written into the Holiness Code found in Leviticus because they concretized key elements in Israel's relationship with God: her confidence that God would provide abundantly for the chosen people even while they rested, her gratitude for God's faithful love, her recognition that we are stewards of the gifts of creation rather than its owners, and her respect for the personal rights and human dignity of God's chosen ones. The eloquent words of Leviticus 25:18-21 aim at arousing deep confidence in God's providence: "Observe my precepts and be careful to keep my regulations, for then you will dwell securely in the land. The land will yield its fruit and you will have food in abundance, so that you may live there without worry. Therefore, do not say, 'What shall we eat in the seventh year, if we do not then sow or reap our crop?' I will bestow such blessings on you in the sixth year, so that there will then be crop enough for three years."

Of course, few themes were dearer to St. Vincent. He saw God's providence at work everywhere. At times his words were rousing: "We cannot better assure our eternal happiness than by living and dying in the service of the poor, in the arms of providence, and with genuine renouncement of ourselves in order to follow Jesus Christ" (SV III, 392). For Vincent, trust in providence is the key to finding meaning when confronted with the sometimes tragic polarities of human experience: abundance and poverty, health and sickness, life and death, grace and sin, peace and violence, love and hatred, design and chaos, plan and disruption. The missionary, St. Vincent believed, proclaims hope, good news, even in the darkness. Men and women whose lives witness to meaning and who can speak meaning are ministers of providence. Docility to providence, a fundamental virtue for the missionary to the poor, means reverent trust before the mystery of God, as revealed in Christ, in whom life, death, and resurrection are integrated.

2. *Reconciliation*

When I was in Taiwan recently, I noticed that its bishops had chosen reconciliation as the focus for the year 2000. They noted that in today's world, despite high technology and an increasingly global economy, huge numbers of people experience alienation rather than peace and happiness. Many endure tension, over-stimulation, suffering, and violence. All sorts of contradictions invade their lives. Some find themselves alienated from self, from others, from creation, and from God. The bishops' document recalled that life's journey involves moving

- from self-depreciation to self-appreciation,

- from indifference to caring for one another,
- from destruction of nature to respect for it,
- from enclosure within oneself to trust in a transcendent Being.

These four inner movements lead to four imperatives:

- love yourself,
- cherish others,
- value creation,
- adore God.

The Jubilee Year challenges us to experience God's reconciling love and to proclaim it to others. Do we love ourselves with the kind of caring, forgiving love with which God loves us? Do we cherish others: our brothers in community, the poor whom we serve, our companions in the apostolate? Do we value creation: the air we breathe, the water that purifies our bodies and quenches our thirst, the forests that play such a balancing role in the planet's equilibrium? Do we reverence God whose divine presence breaks in on us in the beauty of creation, in the love of others, and in the person of Jesus who is the source of our life?

Of course, reconciliation was at the heart of the missions that Vincent himself preached and the mission that he gave to the Company. The remission of sin, the sacrament of reconciliation, the general confession, the settling of family quarrels were all key elements in the first popular missions conducted by Vincent and his companions. Vincent encouraged the missionaries themselves to have "exuberant confidence in the sovereign Creator" (SV III, 279), so that they would communicate God's healing love to others.

We all bear scars and past sins into the new millennium. We need healing. Is there a genuine "soul friend," a confessor or spiritual director to whom we can uncover our wounds and with whom we can speak openly and often about our need for healing? Do we sense within ourselves, as the third millennium dawns, that we are growing toward greater personal wholeness, integrity and reconciliation with ourselves, with others, with creation, with God? As confessors and spiritual directors can we ourselves be a healing presence for others in this time of reconciliation?

3. *Gratitude*

If the Sabbath was a special day for Israel to give thanks to God, then the Jubilee, the sabbatical of sabbaticals, should be a great thanksgiving time. At the heart of the spirituality of the poor of Israel is a recognition that everything is gift. Only those who are humble are capable of proclaiming that "God who is mighty has done great things for me" (Lk 1:49). The songs of Israel's poor are full of gratitude: "Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, for his loving kindness endures forever. Give thanks to the God of gods, for his loving kindness endures forever" (Ps 136:1-2).

Henri Nouwen, who entitled a book that recounted his experience among the poor *Gracias*, wrote a reflection that struck me forcefully:

Many poor people live in such close relationship with the many rhythms of nature that all the goods that come to them are experienced as free gifts of God. Children and friends, bread and wine, music and pictures, trees and flowers, water and life, a house, a room with just one bed, all are gifts to be grateful for and celebrated. This basic sense I have come to know. I am always surrounded by words of thanks, "Thanks for your visit, your blessing, your sermon, your prayer, your gifts, your presence among us." Even the smallest and most necessary goods are a reason for gratitude. This all-pervading gratitude is the basis for celebration. The poor not only are grateful for life, they also celebrate life constantly.

After healing the ten lepers, Jesus expresses pain that only one returns to express gratitude (Lk 17:11-19). Similarly, St. Vincent warns the Company that ingratitude is the "crime of crimes" (SV III, 37). He encourages us, as proclaimers of the Jubilee, to recognize that everything is God's gift (SV I, 182). Do we know how to express words of gratitude to others? to those who love us? to our friends? to the Congregation? to the poor? Do we celebrate the Eucharist joyfully as persons whose fundamental life-stance is one of gratitude?

PUTTING THE JUBILEE INTO PRACTICE

St. Vincent has left us three conferences about jubilee years (SV IX, 45f; IX, 609f; X, 229f) and in his letters urges others to participate in them (SV III, 317; V, 574). Today I encourage all the members of the Congregation to *practice the Jubilee* in a distinctively Vincentian way. I suggest to you three means, hoping that local communities will reflect on ways of concretizing these means even further.

1. *Pilgrimage to the Poor*

Some sources estimate that 30 to 40 million people will come to Rome in the year 2000. Millions will undoubtedly also flock to Jerusalem. But, from a global perspective, those who make such long journeys will be relatively few in number and most of them will have significant economic resources. I suggest today that for us Vincentians the most appropriate pilgrimage is to the poor. In them, most of all, will we find God. This pilgrimage is surely not a long one; the poor are never very far away. I am certain, actually, that most confreres have often made this trip. But I ask that each of us, as the third millennium dawns, would go to the poor in a new way.

First, go to *listen*. What do the poor have to say to us now, 2000 years after the coming of Jesus "to preach good news" to them? It is essential that we listen before we

speaking, that we understand their real situation before we plan. Are there ways in which we can gather together the poor of our neighborhoods, our parishes, our schools to understand their deepest yearnings, to know how we can better serve them? The poor will speak to us eloquently if we allow them. They will teach us too, about their willingness to share the little that they have, about their gratitude to God for the simple gifts he gives them, about their hoping against hope that God will provide.

Secondly, I encourage you to make this pilgrimage to the poor at the beginning of the third millennium *with others*. Bring the young especially. The experience can change their lives. As Pope John Paul II has frequently pointed out, the young hold the future in their hands. It belongs to them. Sixty-four percent of the world's population is under 25. It is crucial to involve them in our mission. Today our own youth groups are growing very rapidly. While in Taiwan last April I discovered that they have sprung up spontaneously there, almost without our taking any initiative. The young want to do something with their lives. Do not hesitate to call forth their generosity by placing before them the needs of suffering humanity.

2. *Prayer*

St. Vincent was an incredibly active man, but his contemporaries also regarded him as a contemplative. Our Constitutions (42) call us, like him, to be contemplatives in action and apostles in prayer.

In a healthy Vincentian spirituality, prayer and action go hand in hand. Divorced from action, prayer can turn escapist; it can lose itself in fantasy. Divorced from prayer, service can become shallow; it can have a driven, addictive quality to it.

Recently I listened to a conference in which the priest asked: "What is the mental image that others have of our Community? What is the 'photo' that they walk away with after they have visited us?" This priest, who was serving the lay Community of Sant'Egidio, which performs remarkable works among the poor in Rome, responded: "I think the mental photo that most people have of us is our Community at prayer." I suspect that he is right. It is surely the mental image that I have of his Community, even though it is well-known for its service to the poor and for its mediation of peace in several countries.

What is the "photo" that young people who visit us have of the Congregation of the Mission? Do they return to their homes struck by how fervently and faithfully we pray? Do they sense that the two lungs by which the Congregation breathes are prayer and the poor?

Let me offer two suggestions in this regard.

First, in our own spiritual tradition mental prayer plays an extremely important role.

Few things received more emphasis in St. Vincent's conferences and writings. Speaking about mental prayer to the missionaries, he states: "Give me a man of prayer and he will be capable of everything. He may say with the apostle, 'I can do all things in him who strengthens me.' The Congregation will last as long as it faithfully carries out the practice of prayer, which is like an impregnable rampart shielding the missionaries from all manner of attack" (SV XI, 83).

It is my conviction that this is as true in our day as it was in St. Vincent's: faithful daily, meditative prayer is essential to the ongoing renewal of the Congregation. Our Constitutions (47, — 1), in presenting a contemporary formulation of one of Vincent's fundamental insights, call us to spend one hour daily in personal prayer. Surely meditation should occupy a substantial portion of that time. Few things are more important to our vitality in the third millennium. Contemplating the Lord silently in the presence of one another is the genius of Vincent's formula for prayer.

Secondly, in recent years, as you know, I have frequently called the Congregation to make its communal prayer "something beautiful for God and attractive to the young." This embraces especially our daily celebration of Lauds and Vespers, as well as the Eucharist. Besides making our daily prayer beautiful, we can also at times give such celebrations a particularly Vincentian tone.

Recently I consulted the Visitors about the results of our efforts over the last several years to renew our common prayer. Several attested that the outcome has been positive, but many stated that the results were meager. Still, I refuse to be discouraged in urging the Congregation to move forward in this regard. I am convinced that this is crucial for our future. I repeat this call now at the beginning of the third millennium. I realize that few, if any, disagree with me about this in principle. In such matters, lethargy is often the controlling factor, even when much good will is present.

Our prayer will not be beautiful — in fact, it will become quite routine and unattractive — unless there is some form of preparation. I am enclosing a brief schema to help in the preparation of Lauds and Vespers. I ask that it be applied in all our houses, conscious that some are already doing this much and even more.

3. *Preaching and Teaching Justice*

The prophet Micah states (6:8): "What does the Lord require of you? Act justly, love steadfastly, and walk humbly with your God."

Recently I published in *Vincentiana* an article entitled "Ten Foundational Principles in the Social Teaching of the Church." Actually, I borrowed much of it from a much wiser man, with his permission! I wrote this article because I am convinced that, as Pope John Paul II wrote in *Centesimus Annus* (5): "To teach and spread her social doctrine pertains to the Church's evangelizing mission and is an essential part of the Christian message." He

adds: "The `new evangelization'... must include among its elements a proclamation of the Church's social doctrine."

We, like the prophets, are called to preach and teach justice. I know that one cannot do this every day, nor even every Sunday. The scriptures contain many other themes, like the joyful good news of the presence of the Risen Lord. But do we even occasionally preach and teach justice? I have asked this question recently in various groups and have found that few respond affirmatively.

Though the Church has been proclaiming her social doctrine eloquently for more than a hundred years, few Catholics know it well. Somehow we have failed them. We have not packaged it in a presentable form, nor made it palatable for their consumption. It is imperative that we ourselves study this teaching and know how to present it clearly. Let me encourage you, as the third millennium dawns, to preach and teach about two issues. I use them merely as illustrations. There are surely many more, but I choose these because Pope John Paul II and numerous episcopal conferences have turned their attention to them over and over again.

1. The Reduction or Remission of International Debt
2. The Abolition of Capital Punishment

It is important not to regard these issues, and other justice issues, as merely political ones, though they surely have political dimensions. The burden of debt leaves countless poor people in underdeveloped countries in a cycle of poverty from which they cannot extricate themselves. Because remission of debt is precisely a Jubilee theme, Pope John Paul II addresses the issue explicitly in *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, as did our recent General Assembly (III, 2, d). Similarly, capital punishment is a theme directly related to the Jubilee call for mercy and to the Church's call to promote life.

In addressing these issues, it is essential to present: 1) the facts; 2) an analysis of the facts; 3) the Christian tradition (from its biblical roots to the statements of contemporary popes, bishops, and theologians); 4) practical conclusions (what can people do?). I am enclosing a small brochure on each of these two Jubilee issues. It offers a brief outline of what one might preach or teach. Enormous amounts of supplementary information are available through numerous bishops' conferences and on Internet. A brief bibliography and a list of web sites are found in each brochure.

I suspect that it is much more difficult to preach justice than to teach it. In the classroom one has more time to investigate the issues by presenting the facts, examining them carefully, raising objections, responding to questions, and offering as well as eliciting concrete suggestions. But on those occasions when the scriptures warrant it, a well-crafted homily on a justice theme can have remarkable results. I am enclosing a few sample homilies written by Walter Burghardt, who has dedicated the latter years of his rich life to preaching justice. I hope that many of us can be as eloquent as he.

These Jubilee thoughts are longer than I had intended. I have chosen themes that are specifically Vincentian and that I judge to be extremely important for our growth and renewal at the start of the third millennium. The dawn of a millennium unveils a new horizon. Today, with you, I ask the Lord to give us eyes that are capable of searching that horizon, that can see beyond it with far-reaching vision — a vision that loves fullness of life and that knows how to promote it, a vision that creates unity and peace among disparate men and women, a vision that breaks down the barriers of division, a vision that helps eradicate the crippling causes of poverty. Of course, we can do none of these things alone. The Lord calls us to do them together in community and with the poor whom we serve. My hope is that our Vincentian Family will be a supple instrument in the Lord's hands, in the decades ahead, to help create a new future where justice and peace reign.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

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Superior General