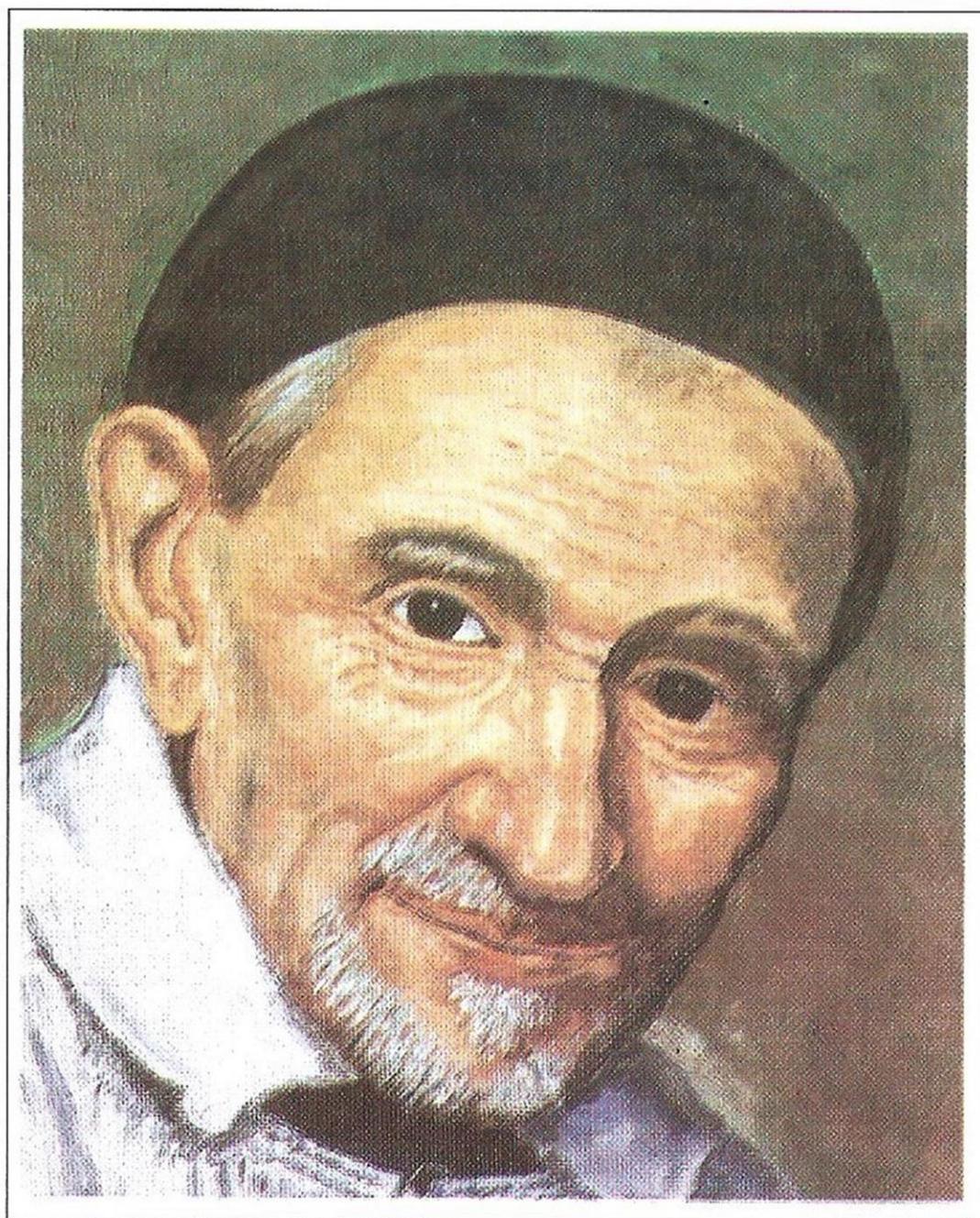


VINCENTIANA

45th YEAR - N. 2

MARCH-APRIL 2001



Selected Articles

CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION

GENERAL CURIA

January 25, 2001

*To the Visitors of the Congregation of the Mission and
the Visitatrixes of the Daughter of Charity*

My very dear Brothers and Sisters,

May the grace of Our Lord be always with you!

I write to you today with considerable excitement, to tell you about the First General Assembly of MISEVI which was held on January 2-6 in Los Molinos, just outside Madrid. It was a wonderful experience. Seventy persons participated, coming from 16 countries.

During the meeting we elected the first President, Eva Villar, and three lay members of the coordinating team, Marcos Amador, David Sanz, and Gema Gabaldón. We also worked on a document on spirituality which will now be used *ad experimentum* over the next four years and on a document describing the internal workings of the association. The Assembly wrote, approved, and is now publishing in various languages a final document with lines of action for the next four years. It can be found, and downloaded, from the MISEVI web site which is under that of: www.misevi.org

For your interest, I am enclosing a copy of an article written by Fr. Benjamín Romo on how to found MISEVI in one's own country. I would ask that you discuss this article with the members of your council at some time in the near future. In those countries where both the Vincentians and the Daughters of Charity are present, perhaps this article could serve as the basis for a joint discussion of the two provincial councils.

With you, I thank the Lord for the birth of this newest and still tiny member of our Vincentian Family. My prayer is that the Lord who has placed in the earth this small missionary seed will make it grow into a huge tree whose branches extend to the ends of the world.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.
Superior General

Lent 2001

To the members of the Congregation of the Mission

My very dear Confreres,

May the grace of Our Lord be always with you!

As the accounts of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection unfold, some fascinating characters appear on the stage. Some play major roles, like Mary the mother of Jesus, model for all believers; Pontius Pilate, a little-known governor in a remote Roman outpost, but remembered by millions in the creed for his cowardice at Jesus' trial; Annas and Caiaphas, the high priests, conspiring behind the scenes; Herod, a petty, corrupt king in a land occupied by Roman troops; Peter, James and John, who slept in the garden; and Judas, the betrayer. Others play lesser roles, like Simon the leper in whose house a woman anointed Jesus in preparation for his burial; Malchus, whose ear got cut off; the soldiers mocking Jesus; the maid questioning Peter; Barabbas, an insurrectionist and murderer; Simon the Cyrenian, father of Alexander and Rufus; the daughters of Jerusalem weeping along the way of the cross; the two thieves; the centurion; a group of women at the foot of the cross: Mary Magdalen, Mary the mother of James and Joses, the mother of the sons of Zebedee, and Salome; Nicodemus, who came by night; Joseph of Arimathea, a rich disciple; Thomas, the doubter; Cleopas and his companion who scurried dejectedly from Jerusalem on the road to Emmaus.

Today I ask you to meditate with me on just one of these, a woman often misinterpreted by history and misrepresented in art: Mary Magdalen. In the gospels, she is present at the crucifixion and is a witness to the resurrection. Let me suggest to you several thoughts about this faithful companion of the Lord.

1. Through an odd confusion of several of New Testament stories (cf. Lk 7:37), countless Christians have thought of her as a woman of loose sexual ways. Rembrandt, Caravaggio, El Greco and many others have depicted Magdalen as a penitent prostitute in tearful meditation. A five-minute search on Internet's Web Gallery of Art reveals 50 paintings of Magdalen, including a light-filled work of Georges de la Tour, currently the centerpiece of an exhibit here in Rome. But beautiful as the image of the penitent prostitute may be, one cannot verify it in the gospels. All we know of Magdalen before the passion accounts is that she, with

other women, accompanied Jesus from town to town after he had liberated her from seven demons. Whatever Mary's enslavement to evil may have been, it was surely great, since Luke (8:2) uses the number seven, representing totality, to describe it. So we might say that Magdalen had been utterly possessed. But we know her in the gospel as cured, a faithful disciple, filled with love. From being bonded to evil, she becomes Jesus' intimate friend. This radically positive change makes her an ideal Lenten figure. She moves from alienation to intimacy with the Lord. That is the basic Lenten journey. We who seek to make this same journey might ask ourselves: What are the ways in which evil still "possesses" me? What cure can I beg of the Lord?

2. In John's gospel, she — not Peter nor any of the other apostles — is the first evangelizer in the primitive Church. The Easter proclamation of this woman, from whom seven demons had been cast out (Lk 8:2), is very simple: "I have seen the Lord" (Jn 20:18).

"I have seen the Lord." This Lent I encourage you to proclaim that striking message continually. Proclaim it in preaching, teaching and catechizing. But also — what is often even more important in the Vincentian tradition — shout out Jesus' presence without words too. Proclaim it by the joy and faith that you bring into the homes of the poor. Proclaim it by the conviction and love that you show in the classroom. Proclaim it by the effective works of charity that are the authentic and indisputable sign that Jesus is alive in the world. Let the good news be visible in the warmth with which you receive the street people who enter the soup kitchen, or the AIDS patients who seek your help, or the men, women, and children who wander aimlessly into refugee camps, or the young people who come in search of direction in life. Let the words, "I have seen the Lord," radiate from you through your simplicity, your humility, your gentleness, your self-denial, your compassionate zeal.

3. John's gospel tells us that before she became a witness to the resurrection Mary had also been a witness at the cross (19:25). John teaches us, through Magdalen, that no one can share in the joy of the resurrection who has not first participated in the pain of Jesus' suffering and death. Mary's intimacy with Jesus was not just affective; she stood by him to the end, while others ran away. In fact, in the gospels Magdalen is the only constant name at the cross and the tomb. She loved the Lord so deeply that she did not shrink from his pain. She understood the cost of discipleship. So too did St. Vincent. In a letter written to Louise de Marillac sometime before 1634, he describes the cross as "the best place in this world you could be" (SV I, 152). Our Lenten journey means becoming more and more identified with the crucified Lord and sharing the pain of the many crucified peoples today. Mary Magdalen remained steadfast in solidarity with the Lord in

his dying; because of that, she was capable of seeing him in his rising. Who are the crucified people at whose side the Lord calls each of us to stand today?

4. In the post-resurrection narratives, Magdalen twice raises a question that in John's gospel every Christian is meant to ask: Where is the Lord now? “‘Tell me sir,’ she says to the supposed gardener, ‘where you have put him and I will go to get him.’” John's gospel gives two answers to this question, both of which are very important for us who live in the Vincentian tradition.

First, the Risen Lord is with the Father (13:1-3; 14:12, 28; 17:21-26). So Jesus says to Mary, “Do not hold me back. I am going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” We find the Risen Lord in the bosom of the Father. It is there that we must go to be united with him, seeking him day in and day out in constant prayer, especially in this Lenten time. Jesus and the Father are one.

And the second answer that John's gospel gives to Mary's question is that Jesus “abides with” his disciples (14:3, 18, 20, 23, 28). He “remains forever” (12:34). We find the Risen Lord here. He lives on in the community, in our brothers and sisters, and he dwells among us especially in the most needy. “When I was hungry you gave me to eat. When I was thirsty you gave me to drink. When I was naked you clothed me.” Our Vincentian vocation is to seek and find him in the world's marginalized.

Mary Magdalen saw the Risen Savior. The good news she proclaimed was quite simple: “I have seen the Lord.” Do we too see him? Do we search for him in the bosom of the Father and rest in him there? Do we recognize him in the crucified peoples who surround us, and stand faithfully by them? This remarkable woman, from whom Jesus cast out seven devils, has much to teach us this Lent. I urge you to share her experience of loving the Crucified and Risen Lord deeply, and of proclaiming his presence, in word and work, to the most abandoned.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.
Superior General

Appointments and Confirmations by the Superior General

DATE	NAME	OFFICE	PROVINCE
01-01-2001	ROCHE Paul	Vice-Visitor	Sts. Cyril and Methodius
08-01-2001	HISS François	Director DC	North Africa
09-01-2001	CANTY Kevin	Director DC	Australia
11-01-2001	GUERRA Giuseppe	Visitor	Naples
17-01-2001	BARBOSA LEMOS João M.	Visitor	Portugal
01-02-2001	MOJICA Noel	Visitor	Cuba
05-02-2001	VAN BROEKHOVEN Jan	Director DC	Holland
05-02-2001	WITZEL Georg	Director DC	Germany
01-03-2001	MULET José	Director DC	Barcelona
05-03-2001	ARTASO ORZANCO Gabriel	Director DC	Argentina
14-03-2001	MARKOS Gebremedhin	Visitor	Ethiopia
16-03-2001	CASTILLO Pedro	Internacional Secretariat JMV	
22-03-2001	KWIECIEN Piotr	Director DC	Warsaw
07-04-2001	NIETO Felipe	International Team MISEVI	
12-04-2001	BORDA MONTES Pedro R.	Director DC	Peru
12-04-2001	SZCZEPANIK Stanislaw	Director DC	Haití
13-04-2001	GUTIÉRREZ NAVA Aarón	Director DC	Mexico
24-04-2001	ABBOUD Antoine	Visitor	Orient
26-04-2001	O'SHEA Kevin	Visitor	Ireland

St Louise and St Vincent

Jean-Pierre Renouard CM
Province of Toulouse

As is usual each year, the feast of St Vincent de Paul is celebrated over three consecutive days at the Berceau. The Eucharist was celebrated this year by Mgr Sarrabère, with Fr Christian Laboure as Master of Ceremonies. A large number of friends, amongst whom was a delegation of young people from the College and BEP (who came of their own free will!) gathered around the 'residents'.

It fell to Fr Jean-Pierre Renouard to give a chat, the following day, on the links between St Louise de Marillac and St Vincent de Paul; a way of celebrating, one last time, the four hundredth anniversary of the birth of St Louise.

For a week, St Louise was in agony. She had entered it imperceptibly, at the end of many years when she was not too aware of it. But suddenly, on the morning of that Ascension Day, 25 May 1623, everything collapsed; she was assailed by a thousand questions which tortured her and kept her trapped in a serious crisis of conscience.

She wanted to flee, to leave her sick husband and her slow-learning child, she began to doubt everything; the immortality of the soul and even the existence of God. Thinking she would find peace there, she multiplied fasts, vigils and prayers (*Petite Vie*, p.12). Fr Gonthier, a diligent reader of St Louise for many years, has clearly grasped the agony in which she lived; "*Her interior night reached its darkest on the feast of the Ascension...her scrupulous temperament and her tendency to neurasthenia became allies in the temptations which shook her faith in eternal life and even in the existence of God. By these means, the Lord tested his servant who sought to love him with a purer love*". (*Messages et Messagers*, 202, p.V)

This was the woman then who took a serious decision: if her husband should die, she would accept no other attentions and would not enter a second marriage, even if this should be flattering and lead her to rise to greater social heights. She made a vow to remain a widow. For her, service of God must come first. But the means of doing so eluded her...she did not know 'how that would come about'...she could not find peace at all.

It was during this difficult and trying time that she went into the church of St Nicholas des Champs on the morning of Pentecost. Suffering, but not despairing, she prayed to God to give her peace...as she was preparing for the Eucharist in prayer, or perhaps as she was reciting the 'Veni Sancte Spiritus', she was suddenly overcome by an extraordinary mystical grace. We call it her 'Light of Pentecost'. This grace, both personal and intimate, has been passed on to us by means of a manuscript 28cm by 9cm, made fragile as a result of being much folded and carried about, in a pocket or a

bag. Lest we doubt it, here is the major event which changed the life of St Louise and which was the very origin of your Company;

On the day of Pentecost, during the Holy Mass or praying, in the Church, suddenly, in an instant, my spirit was enlightened of its doubts. And I was made to understand that I must remain with my husband, and that a time would come when I would be in a condition to make vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, and that I would be in a small community with others doing likewise. I understood also that it would be in a place where we might serve the neighbour; but I could not understand how this might happen since it would mean going and coming.

I was then assured that I must remain at peace about my Director and that God would give me one who would help me see, and while I seemed to feel a repugnance about accepting this nevertheless I acquiesced and it seemed to me that this was with the purpose of not having to make this change again.

My third sorrow was lifted from me by that the assurance that I felt in my spirit that it was God who was teaching me all of this and that, having such a God, I need not doubt what followed.

This ‘Light of Pentecost’ really is the major event in her life, the one which transformed her and set her again at peace and in union with God, which gave birth to her ardent and fruitful charity, despite all her suffering and her human limitations. All her doubts collapsed, she knew that she must lead her husband to the final harbour, and that she could then undertake to live a consecrated life if she did not see fully all the newness of the future community life of the Daughters of Charity. Time did its work and, imperceptibly, as M Vincent said, she would see fulfilled to the letter all that she had perceived first on that Pentecost morning. Manifestly the Holy Spirit, this great interior Master prepared her for great things by giving her, at the same moment, the grace of serenity.

This prophesy was also to put into her life someone she would first feel ‘repugnance about accepting’, by which I mean, of course, M Vincent. It is this companionship that we must discover now. What I suggest is that we examine certain facts before explaining the quality and nature of their collaboration.

The facts; discovery and collaboration

The ‘light of Pentecost’ brought St Louise a peace about her Director of Conscience. If this prophetic vision took place in 1623, it was not to be fulfilled until 1626. Antoine Le Gras died on 21 December 1625. Louise says; “I was alone with

him to help him...he could never say more to me than “Pray God for me, I can pray no more”; words which are forever engraved on my heart” (*Writings*, 986-987, Law p.7¹)

The first letter of St Vincent to St Louise is from 30 October 1626 and the first from Louise to Vincent is from 5 June 1627. We must be missing the intervening messages. As Fr Jean Morin observes, at the beginning the relationship seems to have been difficult. It doesn't seem that the difficulties come from incompatibility so much as from the fact that the spiritual director was involved in a thousand other responsibilities and activities, while Louise de Marillac was somewhat in the situation in which Madame de Gondi had been before her, wanting to have a personal chaplain, always there and always accessible.

The two letters below, on this subject, are very significant.

St Vincent (I, 12) is some 28 leagues from Paris (112km), in Loisy-en-Brie, where he is preaching a mission. This entails an absence of some 15 to 20 days. But he has gone without telling her! “*I was reluctant to upset you by letting you know about it!*” (or “I suffered at causing you suffering”) He leaves Louise, while he is away, under the direction of Our Lord, and excuses himself on account of his occupations. To tell the truth, we understand the thinly-veiled reticence on the part of Vincent who had just founded the Congregation of the Mission, was Chaplain-General of the Galleys, Superior of the community of the Visitation and director of a large number of Conferences of Charity...still finding time, however, to preach mission after mission.

The first letter of Louise de Marillac is also very revealing (Law, 1), especially the first lines; “*I trust that you will forgive the freedom with which I reveal to you the impatience of my soul, since you have been away so long and your destination is so uncertain*”. It is clear that Louise finds her Director a little too ‘distant’. Moreover, she complains about him to her cousin the Bishop of Belley, while he responds to her; “*Excuse me, my very dear Sister, if I say that you become a little too attached to those who guide you and lean too heavily on them; here is M Vincent away for a while and Mlle Le Gras is out of sorts and awry*”. Mgr Le Camus, however, promises to meet with M Vincent.

Little by little the correspondence become more regular and, especially, warmer, even though St Vincent was still to be always overworked; “*I write to you towards midnight, and am a little tired. Forgive my heart if it is not a little more expansive in this letter*” (I,15): and, for the first time, to our knowledge, St Vincent asks Louise de Marillac to do him a favour, a little favour for the conference at Gentilly. It was about sending on two or three shirts...it led to a remarkable evolution, doubtless desired by the excellent “director/ animator” that Vincent was. He knew that, in opening herself to others – especially to the poor – and in engaging herself with them face to face, that herein lay the best chances of forgetting her personal worries and her scruples, and of finding again her personal equilibrium and individual

¹ The reference is to the English translation edited by Sr. Helen Marie Law DC, published in 1972.

blossoming... Vincent himself had indeed experienced this between 1616 and 1618². In the period from 1626-1629, we have 18 letters from St Vincent to St Louise and one from her. He always seems busy but always faithful to helping Mademoiselle to advance on the way of perfection: curing her of an excessive disquiet about her son, orienting her towards the needy, forming her in joy, obliging her to take part in verbal dialogue (in order, no doubt, to help him to clarify his meanings), getting her used to separation and to taking charge herself, inviting her to read the Gospel and to meditate on it, making her seek out and welcome the will of God, teaching her to abandon herself to Holy Providence, he teaches her to see “signs of God” in every event. All of this spirituality was formative for she who would become, one day, herself a formator in charity.

What strikes me most in this outline is, on the one hand, St Vincent extreme attention to the formation of a soul and, on the other, St Louise’s great docility and openness which continued to await both spirit help and tasks from him. Little by little, as Sr Elizabeth Charpy has indicated, the “state of depression which crippled St Louise.

As is usual each year, the feast of St Vincent de Paul is celebrated over three consecutive days at the Berceau. The Eucharist was celebrated this year by Mgr Sarrabère, with Fr Christian Laboure as Master of Ceremonies. A large number of friends, amongst whom was a delegation of young people from the College and BEP (who came of their o

free will!) gathered around the ‘residents’.

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With regard to Mlle Guérin’s Charity, please get the name of her parish, and, if we go to Chartres, we will try to go to help her with the Charity, since we do not know anyone in that area who is accustomed to this work.

² Jean Morin in ‘Carnets Vincentiens’, 2, pp. 32-33.

Farewell, Mademoiselle, remember us in your prayers and, above all, take care of your health, which I beseech God to preserve for you, being, in his love... ” (I,39)

I have quoted this letter extensively because it isn't usually done and, even more, because it is so revelatory of the way in which St Vincent and St Louise came to work together. Following these lines, we move from the spiritual to the material. The two saints came to work together and write to each other in these ways. From Visitatrix of the Charities, St Louise would become Founder and then Superior General of the Daughters of Charity (from 1633 to 1660). Their common concerns would always place them at these two levels; the spiritual and the temporal and these 'two orders' would come to mingle in their correspondence as if they were inseparable. It is, moreover, a vincentian constant acknowledged by M Vincent to Antoine Durand, the young superior nominated for the seminary at Agde, causing Vincent to comment strongly on that subject "*that one cannot simply be concerned with what is revealed, those functions concerning spiritual things*" but that one must also '*take care of even the least of temporal things*'. (XI, 351).

What is sure is that their collaboration would become very effective; they were to live out a complementarity in and for the service of the Poor, whether it be within the Charities or within the Company of the Daughters of Charity. We could not think of making an inventory of the work here...let us simply seek to discern the nature and quality of their work together.

The nature of their collaboration; a relationship of communion

Recent studies have shown clearly what they were for each other and because of the other. I quote number 52 of the 'Fiches Vincentiennes'³; M Vincent found in Louise de Marillac;

- An intuitive, quick, lively woman always ready to go to the fore without being held back by her health; a missionary
- A woman with a sense of organisation in the service of the Lords and Masters, the Poor
- A lady at ease among the Ladies of Charity, since she was, after all, a 'de Marillac'.

Louise found in Vincent;

- A priest, a sure counsellor, for whom she had now no repugnance
- A man, that is to say, a solid support, which she had found neither in her father nor her mother
- A countryman, a peasant, who knew the necessity of long fruitions, who followed Providence without ever hindering it.

³ No. 52; Louise de Marillac; 'A friendship which succeeded'.

They completed one another, as we might say today. But, even aside from the natural gifts or an affinity which they finally found, they lived for a common purpose, for an objective chosen and desired together, because it was, at root, evangelical; the liberation of the poor, as much at the human as at the spiritual level. They were committed to this task by conviction and by choice. They both lived out a real inner purification, they both underwent the same Paschal Mystery. They discovered, in their deepest selves, and in their reciprocal experience, the urgency and imperative of freeing those whom hunger or 'bad-faith' held captive in extreme distress. Their bond was not self-interest, or seeking advancement or promotion but simply the cause of God which is indissoluble from the cause of the poor. This then was their reason for communing and resonating together, day by day. They were bound by the same vocation and the same goal.

They espoused the cause of the poor through fidelity to their God. And they lived out a real friendship; no sentimentality, not even a quasi-mystical union, even one above all human ambiguity. But, has been said so well 'a unity in diversity', *a bond for what was essential*.

It is important to state how free they were with regard to one another. If they collaborated closely, they never felt obliged to agree with one another or to silence their difference of evaluation or judgement. This is clear in the minutes of the Councils of the Company which have been preserved for us. We can cite the following; 'With regard to accepting young boys into the rural schools run by the Sisters, St Louise was in favour of it and saw many advantages in it. But the refusal of St Vincent was absolute "we must obey the orders of the King and of the Bishops". In the same way, with regard to accepting people to stay in the smaller houses in the country; St Louise was in favour of it, but St Vincent saw many disadvantages. The advice of St Vincent prevailed and St Louise communicated it clearly to the Sisters" (Documents 493 or XIII, 646 and Writings, 455 and 466).

Jacqueline "is an unquiet spirit, who causes many little upsets, as a result of which it would be much better if she were no longer in the Company". The sisters present were asked to give their opinion. "Mlle Le Gras said that it was very necessary to send her away since to keep her there as a volunteer would give bad example to the others". St Vincent nuances the advice by giving it in a strong Gascon way; "If, she can bring herself to go and live somewhere and live quietly...I think it would be better"...(XIII, 593-596).

We could give other examples. Yes, St Louise and St Vincent were free, confident and simple; they made their point without aggression or the desire to carry it. They feared neither confrontation nor opposition but kept each other to the final decision.

The other characteristic of their friendship is the sharing. They told each other everything that was useful and necessary for the direction of their foundation.

Sr Charpy has noted this double exchange; “Vincent shared with Louise his positive view on everything and his profound peace. Louise shared with Vincent her sense of organisation and her profound sense of intuition about the Company”. (Cahiers Vincentiens 52, p.5)

Most striking and amusing, however, is their mutual solicitude for each other’s health. Thus, most precise recommendations are sent to Louise by Vincent himself, for example; “Spare nothing in order to eat properly during your hard work, I still think that you do not eat enough” (I, 198d) or “you would give me great consolation if you would consent to rest yourself in bed these two days”. (I, 230)

We also read in another letter; “I think you would get rid of your cold sooner if you went to bed a little earlier in the evening because hard work and so much standing heat up the blood”. (II, 696)

And they speak about purges, blood-lettings, broths, convalescence, rest, doctors etc...

In fact, Mademoiselle does the same for St Vincent. She asks him constantly for news of himself, indicates the latest remedies then in use and he, wickedly, lets her do it; “Your medicine, Mademoiselle, worked its effect on me nine times...my little fever is, as you say, double tertian; but you know that, at this season, I usually have it double-quartian and have already had it that way this fall”. (I, 394)

I can’t resist the pleasure of St Vincent on his ‘health-chart’; “My little cold is better, thank God, and I am taking good care of myself...I do not leave my room; I take extra rest every morning, I eat whatever is given me and every night I have taken a kind of julep⁴ which Br Alexandre gives me. As for my cold, it is only half as bad as what I was suffering and is gradually disappearing, so there is no need to think about the tea.

This sharing extended to all the topics which filled their lives; community problems with the sisters, relationships with parish priests or administrators, and little Michel, the worrying son of St Louise.

There we have the third element of their solid friendship; strength.

They knew that they could rely on one another, particularly in moments of difficulty. The most revealing illustration of this is the moment where the new-born community of the Daughters of Charity was undergoing a real crisis of belief, “a crisis of development, purification, of faith in the originality of this community and its needs” (Petite Vie, 71). Already, towards the end of 1645, there were signs of this ‘malaise’; people refusing to change parish, disputes about Sister Servants, murmuring, criticisms. St Louise asked M Vincent to intervene and so he did on 13 February 1646. He insisted on poverty and on allowing God to act. The Company is

⁴ A potion made up of a thick or narcotic juiced in a water-based form, a tea made of soaked plants or a syrup.

really the work of God. They must attack the evil at its root; break attachments to this lady or that, banish criticism, stop the murmuring, avoid dislikes, speak with friendliness and gentleness, live intensely one's love for Jesus and the Poor person, which combine in one and the same love; "You serve Jesus Christ in the person of the Poor. That is as sure as we are here. A sister will go ten times a day to visit the sick and, ten times a day, she will find God there". (IX, 252)

Apart from all that, the big question was that sisters were rethinking and leaving the Company. Mathurine Guerin, who was the secretary, noted in 1661; "So great a number of sisters left that it seemed that God wanted to empty the house". (Documents, 949)

Then there was the business at Le Mans! It was, from the beginning, a false start; four sisters set out on 4 May 1646 and who could not gain acceptance from the people they had come to replace. Louise blamed herself; "This is, for us, a great confusion as we think that it is only because of our foolishness and bad dispositions which have caused so much trouble with regard to our work here" (Writings 148, to M Portail). They had to set out again three weeks later. Check mate!

All this while, an unexpected death happened at Angers and the departure of Catherine Huitmill upset the community...the house in Paris was subject to Jacqueline lively criticisms. They had foreseen it; a Counsel debated her case and thought of sending her away again (28 June 1646 – Document 397 or Coste XIII 589). And it was during this same council that the community at Nantes was set up; six sisters were chosen, amongst whom was Elizabeth Martin, the Sister Servant.

Louise was going to set up this new foundation in place, in two months! The journey of the sisters was a real marathon. On their arrival, they were welcomed with open arms; the beginnings were promising. Louise was full of joy about this foundation but, in March 1647, and after a winter which had brought a full crop of deaths among the sisters; calamity! The first Nantish difficulties arose. Serious community conflicts became apparent. People spoke of 'a huge disarray'. Jeanne Lepintre was sent out quickly and began what amounted to a full scale canonical visit. On 22 September 1647, at Mam'selle's request, M Vincent once again intervened, in the form of a new conference on temptation and perseverance in vocation (IX, 350 etc.).

Little by little the intensity of the crisis lessened. I like the commentary written by the author of 'against winds and tempests'; in the course of these long months Louise de Marillac allowed herself to be marked by the grace of God. Initially convinced of her heavy responsibility for the crisis which the community was undergoing, she discovered, little by little, the Saviour's work of purification, the gradual removal of all attachments. The 'survival' of the Company, after all these ups and downs, "is proof that God watches over it" (p.87) Did she not write at that time; "God is my God" (Writings, 340). It is clear in any case that St Vincent had helped her greatly to overcome this difficult peak and that they had both sought to seek out

and discern, in the midst of these conflicts, the will of God. And we can be sure that they did, since their work continues still!

This is where we speak of authentic friendship. It is agreement about the essentials. It shows, moreover, that their ‘spiritualities’ were intrinsically linked; it would be so easy to show the points of convergence. It is enough for us today to list the essential points of agreement before we finish; the person of Christ, their sole aspiration; the imitation of his way of acting; daily reference to prayer; the constant searching for the will of God; a charity which was, at the same time, affective and effective; a constant effort to live humbly; a total gift of their being in the service and evangelisation of the Poor; a desire to live out community life; in short, all the values which their disciples still seek to live out with one another and which have lasted through the centuries.

To finish, allow me to borrow Sr Charpy’s own conclusion in her work, *A Short Life of Louise de Marillac (Petite Vie)*, because she has said the last word on what we may consider about the friendship of St Vincent and St Louise; “The friendship which Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac lived out was founded on authenticity, that is to say on the profound acceptance of the identity of the other, the recognition and respect for their diversity. Starting from obedience in the freely chosen relationship of spiritual direction, it moved through learning from the other in a complementary relationship of collaboration, and, reaching the serenity of old age in a ‘relationship of communion’, this friendship is an astonishing journey of sanctity, filled with humanity”. (p.114)

Translator’s note; where possible, references to the letters of the saints are the letter numeration in the English texts; references to Volume IX and above (the French texts) are page references.

(EUGEN CURRAN, C.M., translator)

Faithful to the Vincentian Identity Creative in Facing New Challenges*

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Introduction

The theme that I present refers to the Vincentian spirituality which identifies us as a Congregation, and how to live out our identity in the mission entrusted to us in the Church. It deals, once again, with the double fidelity recommended by the Council: a return to the sources and attention to the signs of the times.¹

A theme as broad as this one could be focused on from different angles. First, I will attempt to present what is meant by a return to the sources, that is, to the intuition and original inspiration of Vincent de Paul, to his spiritual experience, to his particular way of discovering and following Christ, to the heart of Vincentian spirituality and the spirit which should animate the members of the Congregation. Second, I will focus on the signs of the times, understanding this to mean the challenges with which the present culture confronts us. I will point out some possible responses to which these challenges call us, from the perspective of our identity and mission in the Church.

I. The Root of our Vincentian Identity and Mission

1. The centrality of Christ in the spiritual experience of Vincent de Paul

When we speak of Vincentian spirituality, we refer, above all, to the way of discovering Christ that the Holy Spirit inspired in Vincent de Paul. The origin of the different currents of spirituality which have surfaced in the Church, is due to the diverse ways of discovering and following Christ that have been lived out by Christians. Benedictine, Franciscan and Ignatian spiritualities respond to the different ways of following Christ and incarnating the Gospel that were lived by St. Benedict, St. Francis of Assisi, and St. Ignatius. Vincent de Paul discovers and follows a Christ who is the evangelizer and servant of the poor.

These different ways of discovering and following Christ were also influenced by these Christians' particular manner of reading the signs of their

* This article is a synthesis of two conferences given by the author to the confreres of the Province of Paris in a day of reflection.

¹ Cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 2.

times when it came to interpreting them as indicators of what God was asking of them. The discovery of the religious ignorance and the poverty of the country people was a reality that Vincent de Paul read as the call that God gave him to continue the mission of Christ the evangelizer of the poor country folk. Let us briefly review the spiritual experience of our founder.

Between 1605 and 1616, Vincent de Paul was a young priest who traveled frequently, moved by the desire to obtain benefices that would allow him and his family to live comfortably. The accusation of theft and the temptations against the faith that he suffered during three or four years plunged him into a state of restlessness and anxiety. This was his dark night. He emerged from this state, according to Abelly when *“he thought of taking a firm and unbreakable resolve to honor Jesus Christ and to imitate him more perfectly than ever before by committing his entire life to the service of the poor.”*² From then on, *“his soul was immersed in a sweet freedom.”*³ The searcher of personal benefices became the manager of the affairs of God.

“To honor Our Lord Jesus Christ and to imitate him more perfectly than ever before,” this is the key that explains Vincent’s change. Without this spiritual experience, without this discovery of Christ and without the resolution to continue his mission of evangelizing the poor country people, neither Vincent’s life nor the institutions he founded can be understood. And so we agree with Brémond when, referring to St. Vincent, he affirms: *“It is not love for humanity which led him to holiness; rather it is holiness which truly and efficaciously changed him into a man of charity; it is not the poor who brought him to God, rather it is God who returned him to the poor. Whoever sees him as more of a philanthropist than a mystic, whoever does not see him above all as a mystic, is imagining a Vincent de Paul who never existed.”*⁴

Another well-known text confirms for us the centrality of Christ in St. Vincent’s spiritual experience. The influence of Bérulle and the Christocentrism of the French School resonate in the letter sent to Fr. Portail: *“Remember, Father, we live in Jesus Christ through the death of Jesus Christ, and we must die in Jesus Christ through the life of Jesus Christ, and our life must be hidden in Jesus Christ and filled with Jesus Christ, and in order to die as Jesus Christ, we must live as Jesus Christ.”*⁵ The text, much more than a play on words, expresses St. Vincent’s profound identification with Jesus Christ; and in his words resonate the experience and convictions of St. Paul: *“My life is Christ; I live not I, it is Christ who lives in me”*; *“in life and in death we belong to Jesus Christ.”*

² L. Abelly, *La vie du Vénérable Serviteur de Dieu Vincent de Paul*, I. Paris 1664, p. 219

³ Ibid. III, p. 119

⁴ Brémond, *Histoire de la littérature française*. III, 1^{ère} partie, p. 219

⁵ SV I, 293, letter n° 197 to Fr. Portail, 1 May 1635.

2. A Christ who is evangelizer and servant of the poor

The current that runs through all of Vincent de Paul's spirituality is the mystery of the Son of God sent and incarnate in order to be "*the missionary of the Father.*"⁶ "*The Son of God came to evangelize the poor; and we, have we not been sent to do the same thing? Yes, we missionaries have been sent to evangelize the poor. What happiness to do the same thing that our Savior did!*"⁷ This Christ incarnate in order to evangelize the poor is "*the Rule of the Mission.*"⁸ "*Our Lord Jesus Christ*" is "*the true model and the invisible portrait to which we must conform all of our actions.*"⁹

In this same key of the incarnation for the sake of evangelization, we should interpret the practice of our founder which he also taught to the missionaries: to ask what would Jesus Christ do or say now. "*What would our Lord think of this? How did he act in a similar situation? What did he say? It is necessary for me to conform my conduct to his maxims and examples.*"¹⁰ The Christ of Vincent de Paul is an incarnate Christ, a concrete example for us who experience situations in our mission that are similar to those which Christ experienced as evangelizer of the poor. St. Vincent de Paul's preferred image of Christ is that of the sower scattering the seed of the gospel throughout the villages. It is this Christ the evangelizer whom the missionaries must imitate. Our Superior General has written, "*...we who are Vincentians follow Christ as the Evangelizer of the Poor. Focus on, and commitment to, this Christ is the heart of Vincentian spirituality.*"¹¹

The life of the young priest Vincent de Paul was changed by the discovery of, the encounter with, and the following of this Christ, the evangelizer and servant of the poor, who fulfilled the will of the Father. Only in the light of this change can we understand his works and the purpose of the institutions he founded.

3. "New fervor" for the "new evangelization"

For quite some time, John Paul II has been insisting on the urgency and necessity of a new evangelization. The Congregation of the Mission, given its mission in the Church, should feel particularly summoned and motivated by this call. According to John Paul II, in order to carry out the new evangelization, what is needed are evangelizers animated with a "new fervor" and also "new

⁶ Cf. SV XI, 435, n° 176, repetition of prayer, 11 November 1657.

⁷ Cf. SV XI, 315, Conference n° 142, 15 October 1655; cf. XII, 73, Conference n° 195 6 December 1658.

⁸ SV XII, 130, Conference n° 198, 21 February 1659.

⁹ SV XI, 212, Conference of 1 August 1655.

¹⁰ SV XII, 178, Conference of 14 March 1659; Cf. XI, 343, Advice to Antoine Durand (1656).

¹¹ Robert P. Maloney, *He Hears the Cry of the Poor* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1995) 113.

methods” and “new expressions.” What do I understand by “new fervor”? Where and how to find it? I shall quote St. Vincent to support what I want to express.

*“Let us look to the Son of God: What a charitable heart! What flame of love! ... Oh Savior, source of love humbled to our level and humbled to the infamous punishment! Who has loved his neighbor more than you? ... My brothers, if we only had a little of this love, would we remain here with our arms crossed? ... No, charity is unable to remain idle.”*¹²

This text comes from a conference given to the missionaries “on charity.” Its central argument is that authentic love of God leads to the love of neighbor, “because it is not enough for me to love God if my neighbor does not love him.”¹³ Where shall we missionaries find this “new fervor”? In the love of Christ and in love for Christ. In this same conference St. Vincent speaks the following words: “*The Son of God came to light a fire on the earth, to inflame it with his love. What else should we desire other than that it burn and consume all? My dear brothers, let us reflect a little about it, if you will. It is certain that he was sent not only to love God, but also to make God loved ... Well then, if it is certain that we have been called to bring the love of God to our surrounding areas and throughout the world, if we are to inflame all the nations with it, if we have the vocation to light that divine fire throughout all the earth, if this is so, how then must I burn with that divine fire!*”¹⁴

Where shall we missionaries find this new fervor? By drawing nearer to Christ so that the fire of his love burns us. Then it will be true that “*the charity of Christ impels us.*”¹⁵ All of this reminds us also of St. Vincent’s words which refer to zeal: “*If the love of God is a fire, then zeal is the flame; if love is a sun, then zeal is its ray. Zeal is the most pure element in the love of God.*”¹⁶ This new fervor, as missionary zeal, will flow from the love of God that fills us, and from the acceptance and the response which we offer to this love of God.

Father Maloney has written: “The missionary today must be holy. Unless he is a man of God, he will not be genuinely effective, nor is he likely to persevere. It is not the loss of numbers that the Congregation must fear. It is not the loss of institutions. What we must really fear is the loss of fire in our hearts. What burns in the heart of the true missionary is a deep yearning, a longing to follow Christ as the Evangelizer of the Poor.”¹⁷

¹² SV XII, 264-265, Conference of 30 May 1659.

¹³ *Ibid.* 262.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 262.

¹⁵ 2Cor 5:14.

¹⁶ SV XII, 307-308, Conference of 22 August 1659.

¹⁷ Maloney, *op. cit.*, 125.

St. Vincent is a man of action. For him, seeking the Reign of God demands both concern and action. But he immediately adds: “*The interior life is necessary, we must cultivate it, because if we lack it, we lack everything.*”¹⁸ This is how St. Vincent expressed himself during the conference “On Seeking the Reign of God.”¹⁹ Over and over again Vincent stresses to the missionaries the need to be “interior men,” men of faith, of trust, of love and of prayer. If the Congregation of the Mission were to occupy itself only with seeking external affairs, neglecting the interior and divine affairs, it would not be the Congregation of the Mission. All of this long conference deals with the missionaries’ contribution in the building up of the Reign of God. This will only be possible if they have a depth of life, if they seek in the depths of themselves the God who dwells within. “*Let us take care, my brothers, to be sure that Christ reigns in us.*”²⁰ Here is one of the expressions of the interior man.

The new evangelization requires, more than an organizational or strategic effort, a configuration to Christ and a docility to the Spirit. The contribution of the Congregation to the new evangelization will begin with the testimony of lives that are rooted firmly in Christ, the evangelizer of the poor, convinced that the mission is carried out, in the first place, by means of personal testimony before using new methods and new expressions.

4. Renewal of Vocational Choice

The exhortation “*Vita Consecrata*” describes the temptations that can assault those who are consecrated in our vocational path: crises of faith or of identity, settling down in stagnation, individualism... The Superior General has written that, for one reason or another, “*experience says that most, at one time or another, find themselves confused, wandering, uncertain where to turn.*”²¹ “*Vita Consecrata*” also points out some means to respond to these temptations, among others, to review in the light of the gospel and of the charismatic inspiration, the original choice made one day.²²

Let us remember the spiritual experience that we lived in the first years or in other significant moments in our vocational journey. Surely we felt our vocation as a gift from God which we welcomed with joy. Without a doubt we were moved by a generous desire to be holy missionaries, to spend our life evangelizing the poor, to live community as a true fraternity. Our life was filled with enthusiasm for responding to all that our vocation implies. What has happened since then? Have we not had the same experience as the disciples of

¹⁸ SV XII, 131, Conference of 21 February 1659.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 129-131.

²⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*, 131.

²¹ *Echoes of the Company*, May 1996, p. 218.

²² Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, n°. 70.

Emmaus, losing our enthusiasm for following Christ? Have we been disappointed in not finding our expectations fulfilled?

John Paul II speaks of a possible “interior weariness” that can overcome priests.²³ The scarce fruits of our apostolic endeavors, the adverse social and cultural environment, expectations which have not been met, the dimension of the cross that goes along with the following of Christ, our advanced age... produce this “spiritual weariness” in our vocational path.

The author of the book of Revelation, in the messages which he sends to those who are responsible for the different Churches, invites them to reflect on the spiritual state in which they find themselves: “*hold fast to what you have*”; “*be strong in the face of suffering*”; “*strengthen what remains before it dies*”; “*you have lost your first love.*”²⁴

The years that have passed in our vocational journey have been able to offer us a time of growth and progressive coherence with the project of Vincentian missionary life. But time has also been able to destroy our hopes, cool our relationship to Christ, undermine our convictions, and install us in mediocrity. What should we do in this case? We must “*return to our first love.*”

In certain moments of our vocational journey, we have experienced a sincere desire to be holy and to live our missionary vocation with generosity. The strength of the Spirit moved us to overcome the obstacles that were opposed to our following of Christ, and filled us with zeal for the Kingdom. This experience then is part of our personal history; it remains in the deepest part of us and needs the breath of the Spirit to revive it. Returning to our first love means first of all to revive our vocational choice, to connect with and to remember the most authentic experiences that motivated us in another time. These have renewing power.

This exercise of remembering involves not only returning to our feelings, but above all to our convictions. We have to reaffirm our deepest convictions and ask ourselves why they have faded and how we can recover their original freshness. We are called constantly to conversion; that is, to a greater adherence, a more radical and enthusiastic following of Christ: that Christ with his unconditional love might draw to himself our heart, our understanding and our will.²⁵

Our founder explained what affective and effective love of God means. Effective love verifies the authenticity of affective love, but both are necessary.

²³ Cf. *Pastores dabo vobis*, n°s. 75-77.

²⁴ Cf. Rv 2 and 3.

²⁵ Cf. Jn 21:15-17.

“Our Lord is our father, our mother, and our all,” he wrote to Fr. Etienne,²⁶ *“the greatest gift that your can offer (to God) is your heart; he asks of you nothing more.”*²⁷

If we do not connect with and repeat the spiritual experience of St. Vincent, all of our other efforts at renewal will be ineffective. Renewal will not come by means of assemblies, documents, formation plans or pastoral programs. All these can be valid instruments, if the necessary interior renewal occurs.

We live in a time of multiple offers, of great changes. Confronted with this panorama, it is all the more necessary to center ourselves in what is essential and to find a unifying center. And we will only find that in Christ. Only He is the firm rock of our existence. Any other foundation would be building on sand. The first mission of consecrated life is the radical following of Christ and dedication to his mission. *“Taking into account this primacy, nothing must come before the personal love of Christ, and for the poor in whom he lives.”*²⁸

Vincent de Paul found the meaning of his life when he decided to love Jesus Christ more, and to imitate him and follow him more closely as evangelizer of the poor. The spiritual experience of Vincent de Paul can be summed up in a passionate love for Christ and for the poor, established in the following of Christ the evangelizer and servant of the poor. Only by repeating a similar experience ourselves, will we be able to speak of bringing the Vincentian spirituality up to date. And if this happens, then it will make sense to speak also of ways to incarnate it and express it today. Before the “how” is the “what” and the “for whom.” What justifies our existence is not so much a task as a life choice for Christ the evangelizer of the poor.

II. Cultural Challenges to Our Identity and Mission. Some Responses

We members of the Congregation of the Mission are called to incarnate the heart of St. Vincent de Paul’s spiritual experience: the discovery of the poverty of the country people and of Christ the evangelizer and servant of the poor. The faithfulness to our Vincentian identity depends on this. And from this will come also the “new fervor” that the new evangelization demands of us.

But this is about a creative faithfulness; that is to say, how to express our identity today as a response to the signs of our times. I will attempt to bring together, from the perspective of our Vincentian identity, the other two

²⁶ SV V, 354, letter of 30 January 1656.

²⁷ SV XI, 147, to a dying brother, 1645.

²⁸ *Vita Consecrata*, 84 a.

dimensions that the new evangelization calls for: “new methods” and “new expressions.”

1. Inculturation of the charism

One of the signs of our time is the growing respect for diverse cultures. In all of these cultures the life project that Christ offers us can be incarnated. The Good News that Christ brought us has a universal scope and is not necessarily tied to a specific culture. The gospel has to assume the values found in different cultures and, like the leaven in the dough, transform the false values that are found in them. The same can be said for the distinct charisms that exist in the Church.

The Vincentian charism emerged and was incarnated in the social and religious context of 17th century France. That context does not exist today, or it is fundamentally different. And so, when we speak of the necessity of inculturating the charism, we must refer not only to those countries where the missionaries took, along with the gospel, a culture that was foreign to the people whom they were going to evangelize. We also must refer to the changes which took place in the cultures where the charism originated. If we look closely at the world of today, we can see that the profound and rapid changes have brought about new ways of understanding and situating ourselves with regard to God, with regard to nature, with regard to ourselves, and with regard to others. It is a totally new culture in which the charism must be incarnated.

The new evangelization is called for, as much by the necessity to respect and appreciate the different cultures where this has not happened, as by the profound changes which have occurred in the cultures where the gospel and the charism have been incarnated in times past. If the penetration of the gospel in different cultures does not happen, then the evangelization remains superficial. It does not go to the roots; it will seem strange to the people, and will be ineffective in enriching the values and transforming the false values that characterize the cultures. Paul VI and John Paul II have recognized that the drama of our times is the separation between faith and culture.

Is it possible to separate the gospel and the different charisms from the culture in which they originally emerged and were incarnated? The example of St. Paul, who liberated the message of Jesus from the Judaizing tendencies and incarnated it in Greek and Roman culture, proves to us that it is possible.

But today there are other voices which affirm that, among the charisms and the culture in which they were incarnated in their origins, there has been such a symbiosis that, in attempting to separate them, both culture and charism are reduced to bits. The new wine was poured into the proper wineskins, and if one

attempts to change the wineskin, the wine is spilled. From this perspective they defend the temporary nature of the charisms. To insist on perpetuating that which emerged as a response to specific times and necessities would be a useless task, and would be more indicative of a struggle for subsistence, rather than a docility to the creative Spirit who leads the Church and who calls forth in the Church that which is needed in each age.

If we speak of new methods and expressions it is because, leaving aside the opinion expressed above, we still accept the validity of the gospel-Vincentian project, as we also accept the need to express it and incarnate it nowadays in a different way. It is about, then, a creative faithfulness with regard to what is essential, as well as a diversity in the ways of expressing it.

2. Refounding the Vincentian charism?

Consecrated life is going through a crisis. When we speak of renewal, resituating, re-creation, including refoundation, in order to move out of the crisis, we are expressing a certain lack of satisfaction, or discontent, with the situation in which we find ourselves. The renewal of the Constitutions, the following assemblies and their respective documents, the formation plans... have not been sufficient to overcome the crisis. The uneasiness continues.

Whatever words we use, all of them point towards a dynamic fidelity to the charism. We recognize the validity and the necessity of Vincent's original project for the Congregation, but we are convinced that we need an authentic renewal. This renewal or refoundation will come about if we are able to reproduce in ourselves the spiritual experience of our founder and if we are able to incarnate it in new methods and expressions, within our communities as well as in the mission entrusted to us.

Fidelity to the charism requires a return to the sources to try to discover the essential values that make up the Vincentian charism. It means that we have to do a rereading of St. Vincent, trying to discern and distinguish what is the heart of the charism from what are the structures and trappings proper to his times. That which is essential must remain in order to speak of fidelity. The cultural elements (works, structures, customs) can and should change when they are no longer supportive or adequate expressions that serve the spirit and end of the Congregation. Only in this way can we speak of creativity.

This is not easy, but it necessary. It is an exercise that allows us to distinguish the essential from the nonessential. What is essential for the Congregation is the following of Christ as evangelizer and servant of the poor, living in community for the mission, practicing the specific virtues that make up our "spirit" and our particular way of assuming the three evangelical counsels. In

the Church we are a society of apostolic life and all of these are its constitutive elements. The different works or ministries, the structures that incarnate and express in each age the spirit and the end, the style of life... can or should change. In order to renew, recreate, and refound the charism, we need to concentrate not so much on what St. Vincent said or did, but rather on what he intuited and loved. The charism goes beyond the historical circumstances of the founder, and indeed, goes beyond the works in which the charism was expressed in its origins and in later times. We are not jealous guardians of Vincentian archives and museums. Instead, we are Christians who want to follow Christ, animated by the spirit of Vincent de Paul, and as such, to continue collaborating in the mission entrusted by Christ to his Church.

3. Spirit, end and works

These are the three elements that configure the identity of each congregation. For us, the spirit is nothing else but the action of the Holy Spirit at work in Vincent de Paul inspiring in him a new way of following Christ. That same Spirit has called us to follow the same path. For our founder the five specific virtues, that in a special way he recommended that we practice, are also integrating elements of the “spirit” of the Congregation of the Mission. The “end” is to continue the mission of Christ as evangelizer of the poor. The “works” or ministries are means by which the spirit can be incarnated and the end can be attained. The spirit and the end are permanent; the works are subject to changes, according to the needs of the world, the Church and the poor.

Vincent de Paul perceived the spiritual and material poverty of the country people. To remedy their poverty he found no better ministry than the missions. But poverty is a reality that can be displaced from one social sector or place to another. The Congregation arose to continue the mission of Christ, the evangelizer and servant of the poor. If nowadays the country people were not poor, the Congregation of the Mission should not hesitate to move and to take on works or ministries appropriate for the poor of today. This is only one possible example. In its origins, our Congregation took up ministries with country people, prisoners, mentally ill, children, seminaries... Today it can take up others. What is important is to continue incarnating the “spirit” and attaining the “end” in “works” or ministries that truly are at the service of the poor.

To evaluate the works or ministries of the Congregation, and to suggest which could be left and which could be taken on, depends on different factors today. Let us recognize that the advanced age of the missionaries – with all that this implies in terms of loss of energy and a tendency to settling in – conditions the evaluation of works. But an institution like ours, which has opted for the poor, recognizing that poverty is ever changing, should always be willing to evaluate its works and ministries with this criterion: that the works facilitate the

incarnation of the charism and the attainment of the end of the Congregation. I believe that this is also the criterion that our Constitutions propose: *“The Congregation of the Mission, faithful to the gospel, and always attentive to the signs of the times and the more urgent calls of the Church, should take care to open up new ways and use new means adapted to the circumstances of time and place. Moreover, it should strive to evaluate and plan its works and ministries, and in this way remain in a continual state of renewal.”*²⁹

4. Present challenges to the Congregation of the Mission

Neither the world, nor the Church, nor the poor, nor the institutions, nor the order of values or false values of today are the same as in the time of Vincent de Paul. Because of this it is fundamental that we connect with the heart of his spiritual experience in order then to make it meaningful in the reality of today. If we do not accomplish both at the same time, our return to the founder will be archeology, and our works will be a simple means of subsistence or of making ourselves feel useful.

The challenges presented by the present age to the world, the Church, and to consecrated life are signs of this time, some positive, others negative, by means of which God desires to tell us something and which call for appropriate responses from us. *“The Holy Spirit calls consecrated men and women to present new answers to the new problems of today's world.”*³⁰

In light of these challenges, we members of the Congregation are not at risk for unemployment. Effectively three of the principal challenges of the present culture directly impact our nature as missionaries of the poor.

a) The eclipse of God

The process of secularization, without a doubt justifiable, has led to a generalized secularism. The increasing hiddenness of the face of God, unbelief, agnosticism and religious indifference are some of its present cultural expressions.

This panorama should be the first challenge that we members of the Congregation of the Mission recognize. Our mission in the Church is to be evangelizers of the poor. The response can be none other than to renew our missionary courage and our fidelity to the end of the Congregation. *“If our Lord asks us to evangelize the poor, it is because that is what he did, and what he wishes to continue doing through us.”*³¹ The widespread climate of unbelief

²⁹ C. 2.

³⁰ *Vita Consecrata* 73b.

³¹ SV XII, 79, Conference of 6 December 1658.

must call into question our methods and pastoral programs. Are we reaching those who are unchurched? Or are we satisfied with those who are close to the Church? The Congregation's response to the challenge of the eclipse of God will not be limited to renewing methods and expressions. Rather it demands that we who evangelize, also be evangelized; that we be witnesses of the living God who transmit what we have experienced.

This is the response that the Church expects of those who are consecrated in light of the challenge of the "eclipse of God": *"In our world, where it often seems that the signs of God's presence have been lost from sight, a convincing prophetic witness on the part of consecrated persons is increasingly necessary. In the first place this should entail the affirmation of the primacy of God."*³² Taking into account that we are evangelizers in the Church, we should feel ourselves included in the affirmation of Paul VI: *"Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses."*³³ *"The world is calling for evangelizers to speak to it of a God whom the evangelizers themselves should know and be familiar with as if they could see the invisible."*³⁴

b) Economic neoliberalism

The result of the escalating globalization of the economy is accentuating the distance between rich and poor countries. The rich are growing richer, and the poor are growing poorer. Even in the most developed countries the index of poverty and the groups of marginalized persons are increasing. In contrast, alongside the growing poverty, there is waste and consumerism which manifests a lack of solidarity.

The Congregation of the Mission's response to this challenge of the neoliberal capitalist system can only be a clear option for the poor. This response, inherent in the mission of the whole Church, is doubly urgent for us who exist for the poor. *"There does not exist in the Church of God another Company who has the poor as its lot and is dedicated completely to them. To this end the missionaries make their profession; their distinctive mission is to dedicate themselves, as Jesus Christ did, to the poor."* *"We exist for the poor; they are our presence, our principal end; all the rest is incidental."*³⁵

The best way of expressing the Congregation's option for the poor will be to dedicate the greatest number of its members to their service. These members must receive a proper formation, especially in the area of the social doctrine of

³² *Vita Consecrata*, 85a.

³³ *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, N^o. 41.

³⁴ *Ibid.* N^o. 76.

³⁵ SV Cf. II 199; XI, 314-315, 327-330, 367; XII, 4-5.

the Church, so that they can, as St. Vincent said, “make the gospel effective.” The Congregation’s option for the poor calls us to insertion and to be both physically and effectively near the poor in their world. We are not bureaucratic officials in the service of the poor. Rather, we are companions on the journey, brothers and disciples of those who are “our lords and masters.” This will lead us to a lifestyle closer to those we will be evangelizing.

c) Individualism

We are sons of an age that we call postconciliar. The slogans of 30 years ago were “commitment,” “freedom,” “pluralism,” “personal fulfillment.” We cannot deny these values, but neither can we deny some negative consequences: growing individualism in our communities, the priority of personal projects above the common mission, the conflicts between freedom and obedience, the lack of availability and willingness... Fraternal life in community has diminished in quality; and what is even worse, there is discouragement about the possibility of recovering it. Perhaps because of this, a community life based on tolerance is being upheld and defended, a peaceful coexistence, or at most, as an apostolic team or a group of “friends who love one another well” (this expression of St. Vincent has always seemed to me attractive, but insufficient).

The challenge offered to the Congregation by the present individualistic culture asks of us a more theological and evangelical understanding of the community: gathered, as the apostles, to be with Jesus and for the mission. To be with Jesus means to stress the dimension of prayer and to share faith. Community for the mission means to sense that we come together for a common mission, for dialogue and discernment, openness to our surroundings and flexible structures that support the mission. The individualism that holds sway in the present culture is a challenge to the communal dimension of our Congregation.

5. The faculties of the soul of the Congregation of the Mission

As we look at how to live today faithful to our Vincentian identity, we cannot ignore the five virtues which “*are, as it were, the faculties of the soul of the whole Congregation and should inspire our actions.*”³⁶

Why are these virtues, and not others, the soul or the spirit of the Congregation? Two intimately related responses are possible. One is given us by the Constitutions: because these are the virtues that follow from the particular vision of Christ that Vincent had and that the Congregation has.³⁷ And the other: because these are the virtues that facilitate the attainment of the end that we have in the Church.

³⁶ SV XII, 298, Conference of 22 August 1659.

³⁷ Cf. C. 7.

The particular theology and spirituality of St. Vincent's time underlie the conferences that he gave to the missionaries about these virtues. The difference is in the motivation and the purpose. For the missionaries, the virtues, rather than being ascetical, are apostolic. That is to say, they are oriented toward better fulfilling the end of the Congregation. St. Vincent offers Christ as the model of each one of them, but Christ as the evangelizer of the poor. These five virtues of Christ the evangelizer are those that the Congregation needs if it wants to continue Christ's same mission. In order to do this, the Congregation must "clothe itself with the spirit of Christ" and "use the same arms which he used."

Over and above this missionary orientation, the five virtues are necessary for fraternal life in an apostolic community. This is another purpose on which St. Vincent insists.

These five virtues specific to the Congregation, interpreted according to the spirituality of St. Vincent's time, clash directly with some of the characteristics of the present culture. How can we speak of and practice simplicity and humility in a culture that prizes power and competition? Are mortification and zeal capable of being understood in a hedonistic culture?

These virtues, the spirit and soul of the body of the Congregation, in many respects prove to be countercultural. But not because of this should we consider them to be outmoded or appropriate for times past. They are expressions of gospel values, and these are always subject to rejection. These virtues have a prophetic function that we cannot deny, and they contain values that should be incorporated into the present culture as leaven in the dough. But in the present culture there also exist certain values that connect with some of the expressions of these virtues and that we can assume as coherent with them. With regard to this, Fr. Maloney has written: "*It is vitally important that each era reinterpret these signs in order that the spirit of St. Vincent might continue to live in a way that is relevant in each succeeding age.*"³⁸

The theological and evangelical value of these virtues remains. But the way of expressing these values today will have to change in order to connect with the values of the present culture or to counteract its false values. Thus simplicity would connect with two trends in the present culture: spontaneity and truthfulness. At the same time it would be an antidote against deceitfulness and lies. Humility could express the sense of interdependence, of the acceptance and valuing of persons that is perceived nowadays. It could also correct competitiveness and self-sufficiency. Meekness would place us in the

³⁸ Robert P. Maloney, *The Way of Vincent de Paul*, (New City Press: Brooklyn, NY, 1992) 69; Cf. Miguel Pérez Flores, *Revestirse del espíritu de Jesucristo*, (Salamanca 1996) themes 6-11. This section is inspired by both authors.

mainstream of the civilization of love and tolerance. It would be at the same time a prophetic sign against violence and harshness. Mortification would bring us into solidarity with the physical and moral suffering of the poor. At the same time it protests against hedonism and consumerism. Zeal would connect with the current preoccupation for competence and for things to be done well; at the same time it would serve as an antidote for apathy toward the great problems of the world, or discouragement in the face of difficulties.

In the conference “*On the evangelical maxims*” opposed to those of the world,³⁹ St. Vincent enumerates these five virtues as an integral part of the spirit of the Congregation, as evangelical maxims, and as arms that Christ used in the fulfillment of his mission. In a letter to Fr. Codoing he writes: “*let the people think or say whatever they want (with regard to the simplicity and humility of the Congregation), but rest assured that the maxims of Jesus Christ and the examples of his life will never lead us to disaster, but will instead produce their fruit in due time ... Such is my faith and such is my experience.*”⁴⁰

The three evangelical counsels that we assume are also evangelical maxims. These can also acquire new expressions today in order to be “a spiritual therapy”⁴¹ for a world dominated by money, power and pleasure. Today more than ever, we would have to live radically these evangelical counsels to offer the world a prophetic witness of an alternative way of life: in the face of the unrestrained desire to consume, poverty is a sign of sharing with the poor and a protest against the unjust distribution of goods. In the face of hedonism there is selfless, universal love expressed by chastity lived out in celibacy. In the face of individualism, obedience becomes an openness to others, and together with others, to the plan of God.

The exhortation “*Vita Consecrata*” promotes collaboration with others and insists that all this be carried out respecting the particular charisms. Many congregations have a similar end and similar ministries. The difference will be in the spirit that animates each one. Our Congregation’s spirit is expressed in the five virtues. In the description of our identity there are elements in common with other congregations. The five virtues will give to ours a particular color. Perhaps we can only be distinguished by a shade of color; but we should not undervalue these differences. They are precisely what distinguishes the distinct charisms. There are certain current opinions that tend to reduce all the congregations to one common denominator in favor of the only common cause of the Kingdom. These lead to a weakening of, and a lack of identification with, the

³⁹ Cf. SV, XII, 114-129, Conference of 14 February 1659.

⁴⁰ SV II, 281-282, Letter to Bernard Codoing, 5 August 1642.

⁴¹ Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 87.

charisms. And they do not respect the dynamic of the Spirit, the author of the different charisms.⁴²

Conclusion

The Vincentian spirituality to which we are heirs is marked by St. Vincent's experience of Christ and of the poor. To speak of how to renew the charism of our Vincentian identity presupposes a connection with the same spiritual experience. In the heart of this experience we find the double discovery that Vincent made: on the one hand, the religious ignorance and the poverty of the country people, and on the other, the call of God to follow Christ the evangelizer of the poor.

We will be faithful to our Vincentian identity if we relive a similar experience, the centrality of Christ the evangelizer in our lives. From this experience will spring up the new fervor that the Church asks of us in order to collaborate in the new evangelization. Without this, it will be useless to speak of new methods and new expressions.

Renewing the charism of our Vincentian identity implies that we are converted to this experience: to live our lives more deeply rooted in Christ and with a greater energy to continue his mission among the poor, to renew our vocational choice, to actualize and relive what is most valid and authentic in our vocational journey, following Christ on the Vincentian path. From this will flow the new fervor.

Before we speak of how to express our Vincentian identity in the Church today, we have to return to drink deeply from the sources from which that identity springs. The first source was Vincent de Paul's passion for Christ and for his mission as evangelizer of the poor. To resonate with and to repeat ourselves the spiritual experience of our founder is the condition "sine qua non" for renewal.

"Vita Consecrata" affirms that the more one lives in Christ, the better one can serve him in others, going even to the furthest missionary outposts and facing the greatest dangers.⁴³ It also warns us that a congregation is weakened not so much by a decrease in numbers as by a failure to cling steadfastly to the Lord and to personal vocation and mission.⁴⁴ The Church expects that Societies of Apostolic Life will offer the greatest possible contribution to the proclamation of the gospel⁴⁵ and that the missionaries, even before committing themselves to the

⁴² Cf. *Fraternal Life in Common*, N°. 46.

⁴³ Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 76.

⁴⁴ Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 63 d.

⁴⁵ Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 78 b.

cause of evangelization, will allow themselves to be transformed by Christ, and conformed to the gospel.⁴⁶ Perhaps before speaking of new methods and new expressions for evangelization, the crisis of the evangelizers must be overcome.

If the present channels (structures, works, etc.) are not working, the new fervor will take care of demolishing them, and of finding new channels. New wineskins, yes, but because there is a new wine which the old wineskins cannot hold. If the wine is lacking (new fervor), then what will be the use of new wineskins (new methods and new expressions)? Shall we forget that the only one capable of making all things new is the power of the Spirit? Only the Spirit can free us from fear, boredom, and from comfortably settling in.

(GILBERT WALKER, C.M., translator)

⁴⁶ Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 105 b.

Fernand Portal: A Pioneer of Today's Ecumenical Dialogue

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Background – Vocation

Fernand Portal was born in 1855 in Laroque in the foothills of the Cevennes, at the edge of the area known as Hérault; it was a Protestant district. His father, Pierre, was a shoemaker who had to work very hard, as the family was not well off. Pierre was literate, though, and had a sincere and solid Christian faith, and used to go on several local pilgrimages. Fernand's mother was Louise Lafabrie and his grandmother Rosa Albus, which was the origin later on of the pseudonym Fernand Albus with which he used to sign certain articles in periodicals. He had two brothers who died in childhood, and a sister Marie.

He was brought up in a Christian atmosphere and was sent as a pupil to his uncle Jean-François Portal, a parish priest. This, however, did not last long as his uncle advised that he be sent to the minor seminary in Beaucaire. Once again this was a temporary remedy, and the eventual solution was that he continued his education in the minor seminary in Montpellier. But Fernand did not want to be a priest. He wanted to join the army, a career which seemed more suited to his character; he was lively and loved activity. Around then, too, he began to show a questioning open-mindedness. For example, he unhesitatingly welcomed Leo XIII's encyclical inviting French Catholics to align themselves with the new Republic, which had previously been rendered suspect by Popes like Pius IX for example. Fernand Portal was interested in all the topics of his day; he was open to dialogue.

He did not, however, seem particularly interested in Protestantism, in spite of his coming from the Cevennes. Anyway, for Portal Protestants were a small group. (It must be made clear here that the Protestantism of the Cevennes was Calvinist or Reformed, still strongly affected by the revolt of the Camisards. The Protestants of the Cevennes are in no way to be confused with Alsatian Lutherans, for example!).

His schooling in Montpellier was to prove decisive for the emergence of his vocation to the priesthood. The Vincentians had been in the minor seminary since 1845, and their lifestyle was obviously the origin of his missionary vocation.

He wrote to his parents one day: “My tastes, my character, everything inclines me towards a religious congregation, and I had only one idea, I wanted to become a son of St Vincent de Paul.” What he did not tell them, though, was that he would have to become a seminarist in Paris, at 95, rue de Sèvres, far away from home. By this time he had only one aim: to head off to China as a missionary. This was totally in keeping with his taste for adventure, and with his mind, which was open to the world. He was totally committed to his plan to be a missionary, right up to his ordination to the priesthood.

At the end of the 19th century Fernand Portal was not exceptional in this. The French Church was going through a real renewal which was showing itself, among other things, in a huge surge of missionary activity, especially towards far off lands. The trauma of the French Revolution, which had marked French Catholics, was gradually easing. The Church was recovering self-confidence. Missionary congregations were an even better example of the new found confidence, and the example of the Chinese and Vietnamese martyrs was a powerful stimulant for plenty of missionary vocations. Here we need only mention the Vincentian martyrs of China or Abyssinia.

Father Portal, Vincentian

On his arrival in Paris Fernand Portal was received into the seminary on his birthday, 14 August 1874. He took his vows in 1876, received the tonsure, minor orders and sub-diaconate in 1878. He was ordained deacon in 1879 and priest in 1880. It would appear that his formation was absolutely typical. But in Paris he experienced problems, because clerical students were not favourably regarded by the people of Paris, stamped with a whole revolutionary tradition and still remembering the recent events at the time of the *Commune*.

Right up to his ordination Fernand Portal believed that he could set out for China as a missionary! But since 1878 his health had not been too good and his plans were suddenly up for re-examination. A new career was then put before him, professor in a major seminary. This was work very dear to the heart of St Vincent, and one into which Fernand Portal threw himself enthusiastically.

His first appointment was to Oran [in Algeria]¹ where he had to face up to the reality of himself. In 1881 health problems arose again and indicated that he needed to be in a warmer climate, such as Lisbon or the major seminary in Nice. In 1884 he was appointed to the seminary in Cahors, to teach dogmatic and moral theology.

In spite of his disappointment at not being able to go to China he accepted, as a son of St Vincent, that the good results of missions could not be sustained

¹Words in square brackets have been inserted by the translator.

unless the local priests were well formed in the seminary. All through his life Fr. Portal never missed an opportunity of stressing the importance of the formation of future priests as an eminently Vincentian work.

His new mission as a professor in a diocesan major seminary meant that he had to set about much reading in the area of moral and dogmatic theology. It should also be noted that illness had given him a taste for study. His great open-mindedness led him to discover many writings. He gradually began to sense the enormous importance of the history of theology. "My reading was in the direction of history, even from the theological point of view," he would say later on, in 1909. "Theology is merely a history of what God has revealed to the human race" (extract from a letter of 1887). Following this line he came across Newman's *Essay [on the Development of Christian Doctrine]*, and the work of the German [Johann Adam] Möhler, a German, on the unity of the Church. Following the tradition of the 17th century French School he began to read the actual works of the Church Fathers in order to learn about the gradual clarification of dogmas, and therefore the development of Christian doctrine over a period of time. He was also interested in the recent history of French Catholicism:

*I have always been particularly interested in the history of the French Church, whose special image attracted me. In recent times (the period before his meeting with Halifax) I have followed with close attention the biographies and studies concerning our 19th century Catholic movement. It was especially what I have read recently that led to an increase in my love for the Church; these works have again put before my eyes examples, the memory of which later on was not without influence on my behaviour in difficult situations (Quotation from the manuscript text of *The Union of the Churches*).*

Through such serious reading Portal moved away from a sort of fixation in theology. As well as that, new data from science and the research of certain university lecturers such as Alfred Loisy in no way shook his faith. But it must be stressed that Portal's initiative was at that time rather unusual for a professor of dogmatic and moral theology, who was supposed to do nothing more than merely comment on the textbooks! A professor of his sort was certainly going to surprise the students in Cahors seminary. Let us hear what one of them, Msgr. Jean Calvet, had to say:

The moral theology lectures were just so so, but they were interspersed, without our knowing exactly why, with reflections on the history of the sacraments and on newspaper reports of present-day religious affairs. This professor who, from a sense of duty did his work as professor, was possessed by an idea, lived an idea, which had its origin in himself and in

some of his friends. He used to dream of the union of the Christian Churches, and he worked for the re-union of the Christian Churches” (Jean Calvet: *Visages d’un demi-siècle*, p. 10).

The First Anglo-Roman Campaign 1889-1896

Portal’s ecumenical vocation began by chance when he happened to meet an Anglican, Lord Halifax. This was far from the upper echelons of university thought. Portal could have said, rather like St Vincent, “We did not think of it!”

The adventure began on the Island of Madeira where Halifax had gone in December 1889, bringing his son Charles who had contracted tuberculosis. At the same time Portal was acting as a replacement for one of the two chaplains, who were also patients, in Funchal hospice. But Portal’s illness was short and he was soon out of a job. One day he received a visit from Halifax who, like himself, had nothing to do; he was looking for someone to accompany him on his long walks around the island. For a long time he had been interested in the work of St Vincent and the Vincentian Family. They went on many walks together, always discussing religious affairs. Portal got the idea of trying to convert the Anglican, but a deep friendship, mixed with respect, began to form between the two men.

Before going any further, we should get to know Lord Halifax better. Under his family name, Charles Lindley Wood, [the second Viscount] Halifax was a close friend of the Prince of Wales. Family members had been in the government of the United Kingdom. His grandfather had been Prime Minister and his father Chancellor of the Exchequer. As early as 1868 he had wanted to devote himself to the service of the Church of England, in spite of a brilliant career as secretary to his cousin the Home Secretary.

In the Church of England his service was strongly linked to a trend known as the Oxford Movement. This was a group of Christians, lay and clerical, who were rediscovering, within the Church of England, the reality of the Church as an institution founded by Christ, and confirmed by the faith of the Fathers of the early centuries (the period of the undivided Church), and of the first seven ecumenical councils. At the same time these Christians had rediscovered the heritage of the Apostles through the unbroken succession of bishops; (the Anglican Church has always been episcopalian). The Oxford Movement included some famous theologians such as Newman (before his conversion to Roman Catholicism), Keble and Pusey.

The ideas of the Oxford Movement also had a more popular form known as the Ritualist Movement. This was about bringing these ideas into a liturgy centred especially on the Eucharist, which would once again take the principal

place in the Church of England. But the movement was not merely something liturgical. It also set up very active charitable groups, as well as religious communities such as the Society of St John the Evangelist. Some of these were inspired by St. Vincent de Paul. The Ritualist Movement, especially from 1859 onwards, was centred on the English Church Union, of which Lord Halifax became president in 1868. The Church of England, therefore, was experiencing a genuine theological, liturgical and pastoral renewal, a real “revival,” something which periodically happens in Anglo-Saxon countries. It was, then, a man of the first rank, animated by a deep faith, whom Fr. Portal met on the Island of Madeira.

In 1890, at the end of a journey, Portal suggested to Halifax that he become a Roman Catholic. He refused point blank, but this in no way affected their friendship. Perhaps the moment had come for dialogue on the basis of equality, making possible at the same time a better mutual understanding of the two Churches. This brotherly dialogue gave rise to wanting to work towards union between the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion.

It was therefore essential, at all costs, to continue the Madeira conversations. But how? To the amazement of the seminarians, Lord Halifax stayed in Cahors seminary from 2-7 April 1892. Here is what Msgr. Calvet says:

We were absolutely amazed to see (Lord Halifax) in the refectory sitting beside the superior at mealtime, while listening to Montalembert's The Monks of the West which was being read... But we were even more amazed when we saw him in the chapel, in the stall next to the superior's, following the liturgy with a missal – Roman, obviously, – kneeling down and making the sign of the cross. This got our brains working feverishly. After all, this man was a heretic! ... He was attending Mass with obvious fervour; he therefore believed in the Mass! Discussions were following their course (Ibid. pp. 11-12).

Meanwhile Portal had a scheme which he proposed to Halifax: to set up a meeting between Catholics and Anglicans, the purpose of which would be to debate the question of Anglican orders. The debate was merely the framework within which to hold a summit meeting between the hierarchies of the two Churches. With this in view Portal, since 1891, had been continuously compiling notes on priesthood in the Church of England. The question of the validity of Anglican ordinations was primarily a matter for historians and canonists, and in Portal's plan ought to allow subsequent study of the doctrinal divergences between Rome and Canterbury.

As bait for the theological debate Portal presented Halifax with a small booklet called simply *Les Ordinations Anglicanes*, which had been first

published in the December 1893 issue of *La Science Catholique*. In his work he was helped by the Anglican monk [Frederick William] Puller, a good theologian and expert on the Church Fathers. From the Anglican side, urged on by Halifax, the theologians Denny and Lacey published at the same time an essay in Latin *De Hierarchia Anglicana*.

Meticulously and diplomatically Portal demonstrated the nullity of Anglican orders, basing himself mainly on a doctrinal point, difficult enough to appreciate, the defect of intention. In order to do this he examined, from the historical point of view, episcopal ordinations of the 16th century during the reign of Elizabeth I, as well as the Anglican Ordinal. From another perspective, basing himself on the Decree for the Armenians of Pope Eugene IV during the Council of Florence (1439), he showed the invalidity of Anglican Orders through defect of rite. For the Catholic Church valid ordination depends on the rite of “the giving of the instruments,” the bible to candidates for diaconate and the chalice and paten to candidates for priesthood; nowadays this is very much a secondary rite, as the matter and form of the sacrament of orders are the imposition of hands and the consecratory prayer. In the 16th century the English reformers had kept only the giving of the bible, even for ordination to the priesthood, which was interpreted by the Catholic Church as a very Protestant wish to alter the nature of priesthood. But against this, they wished, in conformity with the usage of the primitive Church, to stress the imposition of hands and the consecratory prayer to the Holy Spirit as matter and form of orders. From the position taken in an earlier historical study Portal’s argument was to show that there was a long period in the Latin Church when “the giving of the instruments” had not been in use, and it had never been used in the Orthodox Church. Yet this did not in any way prevent the Catholic Church from holding that orders in the Orthodox Church are valid. So, getting down to essentials, why would the Roman Church not recognise for the Church of England what it does for the Oriental Church? In fact the western argument with regard to the sacrament of Orders and the “giving of the instruments” would be nothing more, according to Portal, than a simple disciplinary matter. He wrote: “If the Church has had the power to determine the sign, the Church can change it” (*Les Ordinations Anglicanes*, p. 34). Portal was aware of the weakness of the arguments in favour of the invalidity of Anglican Orders. But in the interest of objectivity in the debate which was soon to take place between Catholics and Anglicans, he presented the position of the Catholic party.

From the point of view of theological research Portal also wanted to show that a position, even one formally taken by the magisterium, could be led to evolve through new research, especially in the area of history. For that reason, the question of Anglican Orders remained an open question!

From the moment of its publication the booklet aroused strong reactions in the press, especially cross-Channel, which was something new. It was, in fact, the first time that the press reacted to an ecumenical debate. Fernand Portal and Lord Halifax had guessed accurately: a dialogue was getting under way. On the French side Portal founded the periodical, *La Revue Anglo-Romaine*, with the aim of keeping the French public informed on how the debate on Anglican orders was progressing. A further aim was to allow French Catholics to get to know the Anglican Communion by introducing the Church of England to the man in the street, or publishing articles by theologians like Puller, [Thomas A.] Lacey or [Charles] Gore.

There was an atmosphere of excitement when a pontifical commission met in Rome, on the initiative of Leo XIII; its aim was to study Anglican orders in greater depth. Portal went there in person in order to be nearer the source of information. The Roman group comprised mainly theologians and historians, among them a significant group of English Catholics. Some of them were known to be unyielding towards Anglicans. Some others were going to become famous later on. Msgr. Merry del Val would become so during the Modernist crisis, Abbé [Louis] Duchesne as a well known professor of History and Liturgy in the Institut Catholique in Paris, and Msgr. Gasparri as professor of Canon Law who would be one of the negotiators of the Lateran Treaty which brought the Vatican State into being in 1929. There were also two Anglicans there in Rome, Puller and Lacey. According to some English papers, like the *Daily Chronicle*, nothing was expected to emerge from this Roman commission. Among Anglicans, however, people like the Archbishop of York and Lord Halifax, were optimistic, and there was great confidence in Leo XIII that there would be a happy outcome.

In agreement with all the decrees of Our predecessors with regard to the same matter, and completely confirming them and re-stating them by Our own authority, on Our own initiative [*motu proprio*] and from certain knowledge We pronounce and declare that ordinations carried out according to the Anglican Rite have been and are absolutely void and totally null.

The sentence was a brutal shock when the Bull *Apostolicae curae* was published on 18 September 1896. After examination of the Anglican Ordinal the commission based its decision on defect of form and defect of intention in Anglican orders. In fact, though, behind the rigidity of the decision the text took a tutorist position with regard to the matter of the sacrament. The magisterium opted for the safest and most approved teaching. It was simply a question of staking out the land in some way so as to avoid any possible misunderstanding with the Anglicans, especially with those who came from the Oxford Movement who felt themselves to be so close to the Catholics.

The Anglicans were greatly disappointed, especially Lord Halifax. The Anglican archbishops replied to the Bull in a dignified way on 19 February 1897. Some months later the meeting of worldwide Anglican bishops, known as the Lambeth Conference, succeeded in leaving the doors open for further dialogue. For Portal the blow was certainly a hard one, but he did not take the path of rebellion. He wrote to his friend Halifax:

The future is with the peaceful. What you and your group have done for the reunion of Christianity will be to the eternal glory of the Anglican Church. You have shown perfect loyalty and generosity. Not everyone can say as much (Letter, 4 October 1896).

Portal wanted to retain confidence in the future, with a certain feeling of prophecy:

In nature nothing gets lost; this is even more true in the realm of the supernatural. A single act of love is more effective in producing infinite reverberations than the displacement of an atom. How many acts of love towards Our Lord and the Holy Church have not you and your friends made. Sooner or later the entire Church will be shaken. Let us not get discouraged, my dear friend.

But the immediate results were not slow in arriving. Publication of the *Revue Anglo-Romaine* was halted, and Portal was sent to the major seminary in Chalons-sur-Marne on orders of the Superior General [Antoine Fiat].

In the Aftermath of the Anglo-Roman Campaign

Outwardly life as a Vincentian missionary continued on its way. After Chalons-sur-Marne Portal was superior in the major seminary in Nice for two years. Then, because of his talents, he was recalled to Paris to direct the education of young men at university level. The reason was that the Séminaire des Carmes, run by the Sulpicians, was unable to cope with the number of its students. They asked the Vincentians to open a new house with Portal in charge. That is how the Séminaire Saint Vincent de Paul began, in 88 rue du Cherche-Midi. (This is the present Provincial House of the Paris Province).

Here again Portal was obviously keen to open up the minds of the young men and put them in touch with current problems. For that reason he formed a study circle, the aim of which was to look at facts and data of the most varied kind in order to sketch out a clear outline of the religious and intellectual life, both Catholic and non-Catholic. Portal was not a man who allowed himself to be imprisoned within narrow confines. We have to accept that for him the Church could not have frontiers! As was his custom, he did not neglect inviting people

of the most varied and diverse opinions. In that way the seminarians frequently rubbed shoulders with Anglicans, Protestants and unbelievers. In order to publicise what his study circle was doing he founded *La Revue Catholique des Eglises*.

But for a second time the chopper fell. In the Spring of 1908 Cardinal Merry del Val, who had become Secretary of State of Pope Pius X, personally contacted Antoine Fiat, the Superior General, and said that Fr. Fernand Portal was to be removed from his work and definitively forbidden to publish anything or to speak in public. That was a serious charge at the time. Portal was suspected of “modernism.” In a spirit of obedience and of love for the Church he abandoned his post as superior of the Séminaire Saint Vincent de Paul and scuttled *La Revue Catholique des Eglises*.

After six months of forced exile in a village in Seine-et-Oise he returned to Paris and took up residence in a flat in 14, rue de la Grenelle. All through this second period of trial he was constantly supported by the new Superior General, his friend [François] Verdier. If Portal was no longer able to publish or to speak in public, there was nothing to prevent him from receiving visits from anyone whom he wanted to see. Rue de Grenelle very quickly became a place for meetings and discussions for some of the students at the Ecole Normale Supérieure [Training College for Teachers], priests and Protestants.

It would not, though, be correct to see Fernand Portal as an intellectual shut away in his study amid his books, or busy with “theorising” with a group of students. He also needed to exercise his priestly ministry in the spirit of Monsieur Vincent, this need which all Vincentians have to have “their feet on the ground” in order to obtain a solid and balanced formation. He never tired of saying to his friends, even those most gifted for an intellectual vocation: “Always keep on some little bit of ministry!” For this reason he himself used to go regularly to the house of the Daughters of Charity in Reuilly. But his devotion used to turn him especially in the direction of a poor area in Paris, Javel. For Fernand Portal the Church is not primarily ideas, but rather persons who must be loved and served in the way Christ did. The scope of this article does not allow us to treat of Portal’s work in Javel, where he revealed the Vincentian spirit which animated him.

The Malines Conversations (1921-1925)

In spite of the difficulties and the Roman condemnations nothing had been able to change the friendship between Fr. Portal and Lord Halifax. Circumstances became favourable once again for reopening dialogue with the Anglicans. In fact, the most recent Lambeth Conference had appealed to all the Churches, especially the Orthodox, to aim at union of the Churches. Were

Catholics going to remain deaf to this call? Portal and Halifax were ready to grasp at any opportunity to reopen the official dialogue, suspended since 1896. Both of them got to know one of the most important men in Catholicism, Cardinal Mercier, Archbishop of Malines. Having sought the approval of Rome, Mercier, Halifax and Portal began organising meetings between Anglican and Catholic theologians. These took place in Malines. They could not be anything more than a simple exchange of points of view, but dialogue had been reestablished. But this was certainly a lot, considering the wounds of the Modernist crisis. There were no limits to hopes. Cardinal Mercier was also a believer in the summoning of a great ecumenical council in the near future! "There will be then, I hope, an opportunity to work for the union of the Churches," Portal wrote on 10 January 1925.

Once again hope was premature. Cardinal Mercier died on 23 January 1926, and Portal's death followed in June. Ecumenical dialogue was once again dimmed down to "pilot light." Before one of the dreams of Halifax and Portal would become real one would have to wait until the great event of Vatican II, the meetings between Pope Paul VI and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, and especially Pope John Paul II's visit to England in 1982. And yet, what a road was traveled in that year of 1926! Nothing was any longer as it had been. Abbé Hemmer, in his book *M. Portal et l'Union des Eglises*, quotes an Anglican: "Cardinal Mercier changed the religious atmosphere of England," and he added: "Perhaps one should say about Fr. Portal that he changed something in the religious atmosphere of the world."

As a Sort of Conclusion

The union of the Churches had been the dream and motivation of Portal's life. He devoted all his energy to this, in spite of the difficulties and the condemnations. But where was he able to find the strength needed to overcome the severe trials which never failed to crop up along his way, and to believe in the future? The answer definitely is in a great love of the Church of which he was always the faithful servant. And this love itself could have stemmed from a perception of the Church. In line with the thinking of the Church Fathers he saw the Church as more than a divine institution, he saw it also as the Mystical Body, a Body which is continually called to achieve its catholicity, that is its universality, by enriching itself from the spiritual patrimony of each of its members. The Church is also the Mystical Body of Christ animated by the strength of the Holy Spirit, a Body which cannot have fixed frontiers but must have borders constantly pushed further out in order always to welcome new members. The Church which Portal saw could not but be missionary. Such a mystery of the Church could draw close to the dynamic ecclesiology sketched at the start of the 17th century by Richard Field, Dean of Gloucester (1561-1616). In fact, the definition of the Church which he gave could have been taken up by

Portal. For Field the Church is “the multitude and number of those whom the almighty God has cut out from the rest of the world by the work of his grace and called to share eternal happiness...” (*Of the Church*, Bk I, Ch. 8). And this multitude “is the blessed number of Christians who have been, who are and who will be” (*Ibid* Bk II, Ch. 8). For Field and Portal the Church was without frontiers! Nothing should hinder all people in search of happiness from getting together in one and the same Church, no matter what their denomination.

In the 18th century the Sulpician, Joseph Grandet, wrote about St. Vincent that the founder of the Priests of the Mission “had the biggest heart in the world.” One could almost say the same about Portal, without forgetting Halifax. For them the Church could not remain enclosed within the narrow frontiers set up between the various denominations throughout the course of history. In their eyes the only thing that mattered was the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church; a way of living in Church according to the spirit of Monsieur Vincent!

But before ending let us once again allow Fr. Portal to speak of Church Unity:

The union of the Churches cannot, in fact, be achieved except by real apostles, in other words men of faith using spiritual means first of all: prayer which is the source of grace; charity which gives understanding of persons, even those from whom we are separated; humility which leads us to accept our defects and our faults. We are all guilty with respect to the Church. That is a certain fact which we must recognise. There, it seems to me, we have the essential elements of all action in favour of union (Le rôle de l'amitié dans l'union des Eglises).

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(THOMAS DAVITT, C.M., translator)

Janez Francisek Gnidovec, C.M.

*By Franc Letonja, C.M.
Province of Slovenia*

Some of our confreres are models of inspiration of how to fulfil the Vincentian vocation in bringing "the Good News to the poor." One of these is Janez Francisek (John Francis) Gnidovec.

The diocesan process for the cause of J. F. Gnidovec began in 1978 and was completed in Ljubljana in 1984. That same year the documentation was sent to the Congregation of the Saints in Rome.

Early years

Janez Francisek Gnidovec was born on 29 September 1873 in Veliki Lipovec (in the parish of Ajdovec, west of Novo mesto), and was baptized the next day in the parish church.

His small farming family, which was deeply Christian, taught him a love of God and of the needy and how to pray for guidance and help. It was their custom to pray in the morning and in the evening, before meals and to say the Angelus at noon.

Young J. F. Gnidovec's childhood was not happy. When he was seven, his mother died. At an early age he had to work on the farm, particularly tending the few cows and pigs. He learned to earn his food with his own hands early in life.

At seven, he attended an elementary school in Ajdovec, which had only a first grade class. So he continued his schooling in Novo mesto, where he was an outstanding student. During the school year he lived in Novo mesto. Not to overburden his father, he tutored other students to help support himself. In 1892, he completed high school with honours.

The high school J. F. Gnidovec attended was run by the Franciscan Fathers. Their example and teaching enabled him to grow in faith. It was at this time he began to visit the Blessed Sacrament daily.

Call to the priesthood

In February 1892 his father died. The only one he could turn to for advice was his parish priest. After praying for guidance and discussing his faith and future with the parish priest, Gnidovec moved to Ljubljana (capital city of Slovenia), where he entered the diocesan seminary to pursue his theological studies to become a priest. Again he excelled in his studies. He worked hard, not for marks, but to prepare for life and his vocation.

Pastoral worker

On 23 June 1896 he was ordained to the priesthood. Soon after he was assigned to a parish as an assistant where he worked zealously. His parishioners quickly realized that their new priest was a man of prayer and action. If he was not in the office, he was to be found in the church or visiting the sick and elderly. People talked about him as a holy man but his parish pastoral work did not last long.

Return to school

The Bishop of Ljubljana, the Most Rev. Anton B. Jeglic, founded the first all-Slovenian language classical college, which was a boarding school. He wanted to have good teachers and educators. In 1899, Bishop Jeglic sent Gnidovec to Vienna to study languages. Gnidovec combined his post-graduate studies with pastoral work, ministering to the Slovenian workers in Vienna known as "roasted" chestnut sellers. He earned his diploma in 1904. Then, for one year, he taught catechism in a high school in Kranj (Slovenia).

Teacher

In 1905, Gnidovec became a teacher in the diocesan-led classical college and was rector of the institution. He was liked and respected because of his knowledge and his personality. The teachers, as well as the students, looked upon him as a model. Often they saw him meditating in the chapel.

During the First World War, part of the college was turned into a "lazaret." Gnidovec visited the wounded soldiers almost daily, bringing them a word of encouragement and the sacraments. There were some Hungarian soldiers among the wounded, so he learned to speak Hungarian to help and to serve them better.

Entering the Congregation

However Fr. Gnidovec did not find inner peace and fulfilment in teaching and in his leadership role. His heart was with the needy and poor, to whom he wanted to bring the love of God, the Good News. Who knows how long he meditated and thought about entering the Congregation. On 6 December 1919, he said good-bye to the teachers and students and, on 7 December 1919, he was received and began his Internal Seminary. The provincial superior commented to the Superior General about the new member in a letter: "Gnidovec is a man of excellent spirit, ready for every task and he is a saint according to his confreres.

His spirituality was recognized and he was invited to become assistant to the director of the Internal Seminary. He longed to join the confreres in giving popular missions, but his work in the Congregation in the Province of Yugoslavia (now the Province of Slovenia) did not last long.

Nomination as Bishop

Fr. Gnidovec never tried to impress others with his degree from the University of Vienna or that he had been director of the diocesan college. He was truly humble.

When he was called by the Bishop of Ljubljana, he became very apprehensive and afraid of what this call could mean but he accepted the nomination and was consecrated as bishop on 30 November 1924. Those who knew him were not surprised when Gnidovec was chosen to become bishop.

Soon after the nomination was official among the priests of the Diocese of Skopje, one of the priests wanted to know more about the new bishop. "Is he (Gnidovec) a man of prayer and does he have patience?" When that priest got a positive answer he said: "We welcome our new bishop!"

Diocese of Skopje

The Diocese of Skopje in South Serbia (today Macedonia and south Yugoslavia, Kosovo region) was a real diaspora. Catholics were the minority of the population as 50% were Orthodox and over 40% were Muslims. It is hard to imagine their way of life after the Balkan War (1912-1914) and the First World War. Many political, ethnic and religious tensions were in evidence.

It was assumed that Bishop Gnidovec was the best choice since he was not Serb, nor Croatian, nor Albanian, but Slovenian. He was gifted in languages, pious and humble, but persevering and a hard worker.

His cathedral was a small church with a building adjacent to the church, which served as rectory, chancery office and residence at the same time. In his diocese there was a lack of priests, churches and chapels.

Seminary

As a shepherd of such a diverse and poor diocese, his first priority was the seminary. He knew that pastoral work could be carried out by well-trained and educated priests. He had to start from scratch, without any available funds, so he became a "beggar."

To achieve his first goal, he had to get priests. He returned to Slovenia where he met with bishops and the provincial superior of the Congregation of the Mission, asking for priests. His request was granted. A number of confreres and some diocesan clergy went to help out, and he also received material help to build a seminary.

Churches and Chapels

Many small Catholic communities in his diocese had no official place to worship. Whenever a priest came to celebrate Mass and to hear confessions, a private house or school served as the church. Again Bishop Gnidovec had to beg for a permit and funds. He had to knock on the same door many times. The government officials were Serbs, Orthodox, and did not want to see a Catholic church in their neighbourhood.

Charity

Many people in his diocese lived in poverty as well as in moral neglect. Bishop Gnidovec wanted to offer both spiritual and material help. Some of the government officials could not understand why the bishop was helping the poor and the beggars and even accused him of "promoting" laziness.

The poor and the needy found out very quickly that the bishop was sympathetic towards them, so they were frequent visitors at his door. Bishop Gnidovec did everything he could to lessen their suffering.

Congregations and fraternities

From his short term of pastoral work in parishes in Slovenia, Bishop Gnidovec knew that both the young and adults needed support and better knowledge of their faith. This support was even more needed in the diaspora. The Legion of Mary and some similar associations began to be formed. A very active member of the Legion of Mary in Skopje was a young girl, Agnes Bojadziev, who later became Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

Fraternities of the Blessed Sacrament, Sacred Heart, and Catholic Action were also formed.

The devotions of First Fridays and First Saturdays were very dear to his heart. The bishop wanted families to accept these devotions to model themselves on the Holy Family. He knew that a life of faith would grow only in good and devoted families.

Religious publication

Bishop Gnidovec tried to be in touch with his flock, but to visit parishes and Catholic communities was not easy and simple. In some parts of his diocese, the only way to travel was on horseback, by bicycle or on foot.

He wrote to the priests regularly but the faithful were neglected. He already understood the importance of the media in informing and teaching the faithful. On 25 March 1928, the first issue of a new magazine, *Blagovijest* (The Good News) was published.

Ljaramani – secret Catholics

With the Ottoman rule in the Balkans, the Muslim religion spread and was forced upon the population. Some Catholics accepted the new religion. Those who did not want to become Muslims led two-fold lives. In public they acted as Muslims, in private they were Catholics. This lasted a few centuries. In order to have their children baptized, they travelled for hours, even days, to find a Catholic priest.

After the First World War, religious freedom was proclaimed in the Balkans and in Yugoslavia as well. But the **ljaramani** did not believe this to be so and did not want to change. They continued to be Muslims and Catholics at the same time.

Bishop Gnidovec tried hard to help them realize that there was nothing to fear. He invited the **ljaramani** to his office. In his visits to them, he encouraged and taught them, for they were lacking in their knowledge of Catholic faith.

Ecumenism

Since the Catholics of his diocese lived as a minority among the Orthodox and Muslims, Bishop Gnidovec tried to establish a good relationship among all of them, especially with the leaders of the two main religions. Some of them did not like to see or to hear about the Catholic bishop, priests and their faith. It was a long process but his honesty, goodness and respect for everybody finally gained him their respect. The Daughters of Charity also followed Bishop Gnidovec's example. They did not discriminate among people; therefore, the Muslims referred to them as angels.

As already mentioned, it was noticed by the seminarians in Ljubljana, by the parishioners where Gnidovec served, by the students and teachers in the college, that he was "a man of prayer and a hard worker." The priests of his diocese were of the same opinion.

When he was home, he said Mass for the faithful every day and heard confessions. When visiting a parish, his first stop was at the parish church or chapel. Although tired from travelling, he spent hours in the confessional.

Bishop Gnidovec's appearance was one of a frail man. It is true he never thought of himself. In all his work for the spiritual as well as material well-being of his flock, he never complained, he never seemed tired.

Someone who did not know Bishop Gnidovec well would have thought that he was an unassuming person. But when the rights of people and the faithful were disregarded, he was determined in obtaining their rights. He did not hesitate to go to the highest authorities for such matters.

When the priests were worried about his health his constant answer was that he had to be faithful, that he had to follow his motto: "I became all things to all men."

In 1938, weakness often overcame him. As the year approached its end, his frailty became more evident. With great difficulty, he led the liturgical celebration at Christmas. Finally, he gave in and went to Ljubljana for a medical checkup after the New Year. It was diagnosed that he had a brain tumour. He spent one month in the hospital and in spite of enormous pain, he did not complain. He died on 3 February 1939, which was a First Friday.

When news of his death reached his diocese, the priests and people were deeply saddened. Ordinary people, even Muslims, said: "A saint has died."

Bishop Gnidovec never intended or wished to be famous or well-known, but he wanted his name in the Book of Life.

It seems that God gave Gnidovec two assignments: first, to be rector of the college in Ljubljana and, second, to be bishop of Skopje. Gnidovec had two difficult beginnings.

Under the leadership of the Most Rev. Jeglic, Bishop of Ljubljana, Gnidovec was a founding member of the first Slovenian Catholic Classical College. He served in education and spiritual guidance to the students for 14 years. During these 14 years he grew spiritually and transplanted that growth into the hearts of his students. Many of them expressed profound memories of him.

He did not want to be a public figure. He entered the Congregation to become an ordinary missionary. But he could not hide from God.

As bishop, he accepted a new field with fervour and zeal. Again, he worked tirelessly as a real shepherd for 14 years. The tensions and divisions, so often instigated by government officials, among the Catholics, Orthodox and Muslims, the Serbs and Albanians, caused Bishop Gnidovec much pain. But in spite of all the difficulties he was true to his motto: "I became all things to all men." He remained a real Vincentian.

Popular Mission Online
Cyberspacing the Vincentian Charism

by Atilano G. Fajardo CM
Province of the Philippines

*If the poor remain without access to information technology, they will
be further marginalized and locked into a cycle of poverty.*

(General Assembly 1998 - Congregation of the Mission)

Introduction

The dawn of the third millennium is fast brightening the horizon with a vision of a new age. The last decade has been the melting pot of a totally new and strange phenomenon, which is rapidly changing our traditional ways of doing things. As a matter of fact, the new information revolution is creating global links on a scale unparalleled in human history, tearing down petty, parochial interests, building and forging a common planetary culture.¹

Indeed, the computer world is the arena to which this age is headed to. This is seen very concretely in the way it has penetrated our society. People buy from the net and transact business online. Students enroll, ask questions and pass in their assignments on electronic data sheets, and even get their ratings online anywhere and anytime. Offices where tables and chairs abound, filing cabinets and folders spread all over, and employees with their private rooms almost occupying whole buildings, are being replaced with simple table and desktop computers all networked to fit into one single room. The home office is fast becoming a business reality. Indeed, much talk is about electronic commerce, electronic mail, electronic offices and electronic conferencing. Their coming into reality, however, far exceeds what we have ever thought of them. They come rushing forth replacing the traditional ways of doing things.

*The scale and uptake of this new information exchange took the
computer community completely by surprise – the development
provided a lesson in the difficulty of predicting what will and what*

¹ Charles Jonscher, *The Evolution of Wired Life, From the Alphabet to the Soul-Catcher Chip — How Information Technologies Change our World* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1999), p.246.

*will not catch among the many applications to which digital technology can be applied.*²

Having seen all this rush of new, highly technological changes in our midst, I cannot but ask the question: How does the Church respond to these changing phenomena? Or, to say it more bluntly, has she taken a move to go a step ahead and use this medium for her mission in the world?

This paper attempts to open an arena amidst the vast marketplace of the question at hand. In its desire to trod a path, it may bring out more confusion than solutions. To avoid this fear, the paper starts by looking into specific methods of evangelization now being used. Then, it visualizes possibilities on how to enrich the present method and, hopefully, offers suggestions on how these projections might enrich both the evangelized and the evangelizer, and also the medium at hand. For this purpose therefore, I have chosen the Popular Mission as the jump-off point of our quest.

In our attempt to create a future-based strategy for the EP Missions, we will start by discussing briefly the nature and practices of how the present Popular Mission is being conducted. Then, we shall see whether the new forms of communication, especially the World Wide Web, fit into this ministry. And, if it does, how do we use it?

I. The Present Reality

The Way of St. Vincent

*The name missionaries, or Priests of the Mission, which has not been assumed by us but has been given us, under Divine Providence, by the common voice of the people, clearly shows that the giving of missions is to be the first and principal of all our works for the neighbor.*³

St. Vincent de Paul

The traditional way of doing the mission is the preferred framework that this paper follows. First, it discusses the three different stages of the apostolate:

² *Ibid.*, pp. 156-157. It is further said in the book that even Bill Gates, who had brilliantly bet that the information technology phenomenon of the 1980's failed to see it coming. It was only in late 1995, that his firm's future direction was geared toward the Internet. See also Margaret Wertheim, *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace: A History of Space from Dante to the Internet* (New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), pp. 223-226.

³ *Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission*, XI, no.5.

the Pre-Mission, the Mission Proper and the Post-Mission strategies. From there, it will move on to future projections.

A. Pre-Mission

1. At present, and even during the time of St. Vincent de Paul, the Pre-Mission is a very important activity in the preparation of the missions. Usually, the preparation takes a month to a year. People are notified to prepare by prayer and fasting for the success of the Popular Mission. Then, as a remote preparation, someone from the team goes to the parish ahead of time in order to get relevant data to be incorporated into the talks or homilies. At times, missionaries even conduct a community-based census for a wider understanding about the mission area.

When everything is ready, the immediate preparation begins. Someone from the team preaches about the Popular Mission during the Masses, in order for the people to have a deeper understanding of the missions. Advertisements and a schedule of activities are also posted during this time in order to enable the people to incorporate the mission schedules into their own personal plans.

2. As done in some Popular Missions, like the Philippines, the members of the mission team are housed in the homes of the parishioners, and stay with them for the whole missionary period. The strategic allocation of missionary personnel from among the people helps a lot in bringing these families to attend the missions. As a matter of fact, while the missionary stays in their homes, they are encouraged to bring the whole household, as well as those around their house to the mission talks and activities.

3. During this period, the missionaries are introduced not only to the parish priest but also the civil authorities of the place. This is done in order to facilitate the use of any public facility while the missions are being conducted. At the same time, it prevents any untoward incident between the missionaries and the civil leaders of the place. Giving due respect to these leaders is tantamount to giving this respect to the people who voted for them.

4. Also in the preparation of the Mission Proper, leaders who can help during the mission activity are chosen and trained as mission auxiliaries. Then, together with the rest of the missionaries, they join the group in house-to-house visitations. This is done in order to invite people to listen to the preached mission.

B Mission Proper

1. This is the main activity of the Popular Mission. It is a time when the preaching in public squares or in the churches is done. It is the moment when people gather together and listen to the different topics concerning our life with the Trinity and our vocation and mission in the world.

2. The celebration of the sacraments also happens during this stage. Baptisms, confirmations, weddings and anointing of the sick, as well as General Confessions which are usually done every night, are also conducted during this period.

C. The Post Mission

1. The final phase of the mission is geared towards the preservation of the fruits of the mission. During the time of St. Vincent de Paul, one of the concrete ways he used to preserve these fruits was through the formation of good clerics who will continue taking care of the faithful after the missionaries leave the place. Another way to preserve the fruits of the mission is by building Christian communities.

2. Some other ways to preserve these fruits would be to leave behind popular religious practices, such as weekly rosaries, bible meetings, and occasional processions to shrines or grottos which people frequent in order to commemorate the mission. The missionaries for their part, can also take time visiting the mission site every now and then in order to invigorate the leaders as well as the Christian community. Other than these, the follow-up structure of the mission depends on the consistency of the Christian community and their pastor to persevere in nurturing the seeds sown during the missions.

Having seen the present methodology of the Popular Missions, let us now envision how the World Wide Web phenomenon could be incorporated into it. The suggestions that are written in this paper are not mere wishy-washy ideas from Cloud 9, but are realities already verifiable in other fields. My intention through this paper is to lay a “tweening” foundation between the web and the Popular Mission.

II. The Electronic Popular Missions

Evangelizing through Vincent's Way

I encourage those using the new technology to increase the church's presence on the Internet as a means of proclaiming the Good News in what we call the “Information Age.”

*John Paul II*⁴

I always believe that the Popular Mission is as relevant today as it was during the time of St. Vincent de Paul. The dilemma, however, lies in how to carry out the apostolate in a way that suits the present realities. Hence, the challenge for the missionary activity is how to read the Signs of the Times and be creative enough to compliment the traditional methodology with the present tools at hand. It is true that the option for the neediest means that we should not overlook the most abandoned and isolated human groups, but it is also true that individual and small groups cannot be evangelized if we neglect the centers where a new humanity, so to speak, is emerging, and where new modes of development are taking shape.⁵

I can understand, that to do this is scary and at times, incomprehensible, due to the rapid changes happening around us. Nevertheless, we either adapt to these changes, or our apostolate is cast into oblivion. If we do not adapt, we become irrelevant, being controlled by the passing conventions of time. If we are reactive and let change overwhelm us or pass us by, we will perceive change negatively. If we are proactive, seek to understand the future now, and embrace change, the idea of the unexpected can be positive and uplifting.⁶

As society becomes more highly technological and computer literacy becomes the language of the Year 2010, a need to take a look on how to use this medium for the apostolate so dear to St. Vincent de Paul is indeed necessary. This paper undertakes the task of investigating that possibility and takes a lead in reinventing that charism in the dawning of the new era towards a path less traveled.

The new methodology caters to many peoples: those who always find themselves online; those who can not find time to go to church during the actual session because they have so many things to do; those who want to attend but cannot do so because they are everywhere doing everything; those young people who simply prefer to see how all these new inventions within their grasp are being used for more spiritual and religious purposes. To say it succinctly, this paper responds to the question: “How do we evangelize persons and structures

⁴ John Paul II to the Information Network of the Church of Latin America, March 3-6, 1998.

⁵ *Redemptoris Missio* no. 61.

⁶ Bill Gates, *Business and the Speed of Thought: Using a Digital Nervous System* (New York, Warner Books, 1999), p. 414.

online?”⁷ Or, to use the words of Vatican II, “the illumination of the new Areopagi with the light of the Gospel.”⁸

The paper in its presentation follows the traditional Popular Mission methodology.

A. Pre-Mission

1. Aside from what is traditionally being done to prepare a parish for the Popular Missions, the address of the Website (URL)⁹ is cited on the advertisements. It could also be announced to the people. Their initial encounter with the Internet information regarding the mission will give the parishioners the information that they need to know about the upcoming activity. Computerized forms, which gather data and relevant information regarding the parish, could also be done online to prepare the missionaries and the people for the great activity. This electronic information will help the missionaries to design their talks better and respond to the parochial needs more concretely. Likewise, volunteers who are willing to help could also fill in their applications through the net.

I deeply feel that any young person, who thinks that the Church has become irrelevant, once he sees this being used for the ministry, will find himself challenged by it. As everybody goes hi-tech, becoming an e-priest¹⁰ or e-brother makes sense, and is worth considering for that reason.

2. Indeed, the premier stage helps both the missionaries and the parishioners to have an initial encounter with each other. The exchange of information through the web gives the parishioners an idea of the nature of the Popular Mission, and also provides the missionaries with information on the present status, resources and personnel possibly available during the actual mission.

⁷ See the *Final Document of the 1998 General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission* (Roma: General Curia, 1998).

⁸ *Redemptoris Missio* no. 62.

⁹ **URL** is the acronym for Uniform Resource Locator. It is the unique address of the Web site on the Internet. It allows the Web browser to identify which file in which directory needs to be retrieved for the user. Prentice Hall, *Dictionary of Computing*, 3rd Edition.

¹⁰ **E-Priest/E-Brother** (Electronic Priest/Brother) is a term which this article would like to use for those clerics who invest themselves and their ministry in new technologies, and likewise, find ways and means to bridge the path towards technology and religion. “This task demands priests and brothers to be deeply and fully immersed in the mystery of Christ and capable of embodying a new style of pastoral life, always respecting and fostering roles, charisms and ministries present within the ecclesial community.” *Pastores Dabo Vobis* no. 38.

3. Prayers to prepare the community for the actual Popular Mission are also available online. People will be encouraged to recite them in their homes together with their families, or by themselves while at home, or at work. Bulletin boards for prayers, petitions and sacrifices offered for the intentions of the missionary activity could also be set up.

4. Sponsors in form of advertisements, or voluntary donations and pledges in support of the mission, could also be available online.

5. Links to other mission sites or online Vincentian communities where the EP Mission had also been conducted could be made available.

B. Mission Proper

Aside from the traditional mission being conducted in the parish, the online mission will now provide the following complimentary services for the parishioners.

1. Live net conferencing or streaming videos, or simply audio materials will be made available through the site. The live net conferencing could be a direct link to the place where the mission is being held. This gives the user a feeling of the real event that is happening in his or her community wherever the person might be for as long as he or she can hook up to the Internet. These clips remain on the mission website for the whole stretch of the mission so that anybody who would like to watch, or simply listen to them, can get hold of the materials. This gives the user complete accessibility to the information, the luxury to save it, or simply to play it according to his or her own needs.

2. Chat rooms and Popular Mission communities online to further deepen the talks will also be created during the whole span of the mission proper. The hope of this virtual discussion group is not only to remain at the level of chatters, but also to have a real encounter and experience of each person. Of utmost importance is that these online communities, after their virtual experience¹¹, be given an opportunity to see the actual persons they chat with online. It is well to remember that the person being replaced is not data-manipulated information. The substitution of the digital can never be complete because the former involves

¹¹ In computing, the term ‘virtual reality’ refers to a computer program, coupled with other tools and devices, that enable a person to perform tasks virtually with all the function and effectiveness of a real situation, but not within a real situation. Prentice Hall, *Dictionary of Computing*, 3rd Edition.

communicating with other living beings, while the latter concerns only machines and their information.¹²

Later, however, the online community can become a group who will not only meet each other for socialization purposes, but also meet in order to see the pastoral challenges and implications to society of the World Wide Web and how they can be of help to form their fellow parishioners in the responsible use of this instrument.¹³ Understanding this technology is an essential component of a global citizenship.¹⁴ It is essentially being “*Catholic*.”¹⁵

3. Spiritual Direction and marriage counseling can also be made available through the mission website. Net conferencing with a missionary who appears on the screen, speaking and interacting as if in a face-to-face encounter could also be a special feature of the online missions. This will provide the sick and the elderly with access to the missionaries for prayers and encouragement. Likewise, the private chat room could also be a venue for bringing enemies together. Through the help of a missionary who facilitates the encounter, the chatting on the web can be an initial step towards reconciliation. Again, web users are always encouraged to get out of the virtual missions and participate in the real missions so as to have a community-based experience of what it is to be church. The computer cannot yet deal with us on a level to which we as an ecclesial community should relate.

4. Furthermore, one of the many desires of the Popular Mission online could be to capture those who are using the net as their primary medium of communication and way of living. The ministry could hope to give an evangelizing dimension within their solitary virtual world. The desire of the online ministry would not only be to keep the interaction on the virtual and digital level but, more so, to the real encounter of persons as well as of communities as members of the mystical body of Christ. John Paul II in his 1998 Message on World Mission Sunday stated:

Man is not content with himself. It is now the widespread opinion that man is not content to dominate nature and the cosmos, the most

¹² Charles Jonscher, pp. 250-251. See also, Douglas Rushkoff in the January 1998 issue of *International Herald Tribune*.

¹³ For the Church, evangelizing does not only mean personally being converted, but after conversion to also bring the Good News into all strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* no. 18.

¹⁴ David Shenk, *The End of Patience*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 144.

¹⁵ *Catholic* means universal. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), nos. 830-835.

*advanced science and technology do not satisfy man, because they are unable to reveal the ultimate meaning of reality: they are merely instruments, but not ends for the life of man and the journey of humanity.*¹⁶

5. News items, announcements or schedules could be given not only in print but also in e-mail forms. While knowing the physical addresses of those living in the parish, the mission online can be an occasion for the parish priest to know the e-mail addresses of his parishioners. With all this information, the parish office can start setting up a data base e-mail list of all the parishioners for news, mailing and announcement purposes. This is a very effective way of reaching the unchurched.

Finally, after all these experiences of the online community become a reality, what happens next? This brings our discussion to the next stage, which is the Post-Mission.

C. Post-Mission

1. One concrete way, to foster communication and interaction among the members of the community is through a web site.¹⁷ A desire of the mission activity could be for parishes to have their own homepage. This site could then become the arena where people interact and communicate using the new technology. They could share their experience by e-mailing the site to others, or simply share through e-mail the effects of the online mission to their life. This is a concrete way of doing their share as missionaries on the web. It is like setting a seal of the new medium for evangelization.¹⁸

2. It is wise to gather all the e-mail addresses or websites of those who have participated in the online Popular Mission so that the parish office may have a record of them. This will be used to send e-mail or news or any announcement to the members of the parish. With e-mail, it does not matter whether the parishioner is home or abroad.¹⁹ The e-mail makes him or her at home and abroad very much aware of everything that is happening in the parish.

Links to other websites created by their parishioners could also be included on the site. Indeed, the parish site not only becomes a site created by

¹⁶ World Mission Sunday(1998).

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/documents/hf_jp_ii_mes_31051998_en.html.

¹⁷ A Web site on the World Wide Web is the name used to describe one or several Web pages linked together to form a single package or location.

¹⁸ *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 28.

¹⁹ Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), pp. 193-195.

the parish priest, but a virtual parish where all information about the parish and its parishioners can be seen. Furthermore, it does not only become a source of passive information but, actually, an interactive virtual parish where the old, the young, and the children come to meet other people sharing their own interests and age.

3. Forms to be filled out for comments and suggestions regarding the missions, and later for the improvement of the parish itself will also be available on the net. The use of electronic forms by the parish also helps prepare parishioners to use both the print and the hypertext media.

4. Net bulletin boards for parishioners to read and post their messages will also be a good way of keeping fresh the fruits of the mission and then, later on, tracking the developments in the parish.

III. The Means

Cyberspacing the Vincentian Charism

“Oh my God, how necessary it is to have great communication with one another. To share everything. There is nothing more necessary. That is what binds our hearts together.

SV XIII, 641

I will divide the means to achieve the Popular Mission online ministry into three parts; at the same time, I will specifically address the challenges to the groups who will get involved in the process of reinventing the Vincentian Charism.

A. On the Part of the Vincentian Missionaries

1. After having enumerated the projections available in the ministry, let us discuss the ways and means on how to achieve the Popular Mission online. First and foremost, it is necessary to train missionaries to be knowledgeable about the Internet. This idea could be drawn out from the challenges presented by the Superior General, Fr. Robert Maloney, CM, to the recommendations of the General Assembly 1998 regarding the formation of formators.²⁰ At the minimum, formators should at least know the mechanics of the Internet. At the optimal, they are encouraged to have a background in computer technology, web design and better know-how of computer programming.

²⁰ Fr. Robert Maloney, CM, “The Challenge of Formation: On the Formation of Formators,” in *Vincentiana*, 44th Year No.2, March-April 2000, (Roma: General Curia, 2000) p.114.

This is important in the mechanics of the Electronic Popular Missions. If so much training is being placed in the “physical missions” likewise, because of the needs of the e-missions, missionaries have to be more prepared to tackle the challenges of this new methodology. Even if a missionary participating in this online mission should have assistants to do the technical works, he should also be knowledgeable of it in order to have a total command of the ministry. The missionary does not simply rely on assistants, though it is good and most advisable to have them during the mission. A lack of knowledge of the computer world can make the whole virtual undertaking a mess. Either he spoils the online services, or he is spoiled by it if something goes wrong.

2. Technical support to run the encoding and decoding of data, as well as the encryption of pledges is also needed to keep the secrecy of financial transactions. A Vincentian lay collaborator could very well manage this. In doing so, the whole Vincentian Family makes itself present, with all its diverse talents, in the apostolate so dear to St. Vincent de Paul.²¹ In a very spontaneous moment during a council meeting of the Daughters of Charity, St. Vincent once exclaimed: “O, my God, how necessary abundant communication with one another is.... There is nothing more necessary” (SV XIII, 641). And with this greater connectedness, the Vincentian Family can be more effective servants of the poor.²²

3. Computer notebooks with modem and portable printers, as well as other accessories like digital cameras and videos are needed to run the EP Mission. The computers should have a good amount of hard drive and memory too. Servers to load all this information should also be sufficiently large.

4. Computer plug-ins and software should also be available from the server or from the missionaries themselves just in case parishioners need them.

B. On the Part of the Parishioners

²¹ First Commitment of the General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission in relation to the Vincentian lay collaborators. See *Final Document of the General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission*, Roma: General Curia, 1998. See also [Http://www.famvin.org/GeneralAssembly/finaldoc/final_document.htm](http://www.famvin.org/GeneralAssembly/finaldoc/final_document.htm).

²² Fr. Robert Maloney, CM, “To the members of the Vincentian Family throughout the world” in *Vincentiana*, 44th Year No.2, March-April 2000, (Roma: General Curia, 2000), p.97.

1. A user name and a password will be given to anybody who logs onto the mission site.²³ This practice will compile the background of those registering and the concrete identification of those who are joining the online ministry. Anyway, as members of the parish, they are supposed to have their records in the parish.

C. On the Part of the Parish Priest and His Assistants

1. The training of the parish priest and his assistants in all these matters and the starting of a parish data base system for their e-mail and website will be a very good way to preserve the fruits of the online mission. This is a very subtle way of introducing our clerics and parish workers to the new technology. I strongly believe that if clerics are empowered to make use of this new technology, Christendom will be amazed at how much creativity and initiative will blossom forth in the evangelizing activity of the Church. The future of the ministry belongs to those who participate in the new information age in its broadest sense.²⁴

2. The missionaries in-charge of the computer technology will also assure the parish of their willingness to help the parish work out their database system. This is a very good point for the person to follow up the fruits of the mission.

3. It is also advisable to encourage someone from the parish to be trained in the ways and methods of handling chat rooms or online religious communities. Doing this is empowering lay people. He can be the chat room administrator, who is directly responsible for the maintenance and support of these communities.²⁵ This will demand, however, a good amount of server running from the server of the missionaries.

Truly, to do all these is to re-tool the evangelizer. In a parallel word, we can say that:

The evangelizer, like the good farmer, must be in continuous contact with the soil as he ploughs and as he sows. The seeds may be a high variety, but that alone will not ensure a good harvest. The most important challenge the one concerned

²³ See Tim Berners-Lee, *Weaving the Web: The Original Design and Ultimate Destiny of the World Wide Web by Its Inventor* (New York: Harper Collins Books, 1999), pp. 143-155.

²⁴ Charles Jonscher, p. 266.

²⁵ The maintenance could very well be done by any of the members of the Vincentian Family. In this way, everyone in the Family of St. Vincent and St. Louise takes an active participation not only in the Mission Proper but more so, in the follow-up activity of the Electronic Popular Missions (EP Missions).

with proclaiming Christ will face is to find fresh ways to ensure that the good seed is not cast about in a haphazard manner. The Good News we have inherited and are invited to proclaim is timeless and too precious to be left to itself. The most significant challenge, therefore, of the evangelizer of the 21st century is to continue the unending quest for discovering newer forms of expression for that timeless message.²⁶

Conclusions

Having attempted to portray a vision of the apostolate so dear to St. Vincent de Paul for the dawn of the millennium and its capacity to intertwine itself with the digital and highly technological culture of today, the Vincentian is left with no choice but to be relevant. We have seen how frightening the path could be because it is still unknown but, at the same time, we can feel how important it is to take the first step and conquer this fear because, in the unknown where we thought there was no one, God has been present all the while.

Popular Mission Online requires twice as much time and effort for preparation, gathering of data and processing of information.²⁷ It is therefore the hope of this paper, to have added a pebble to walk on towards the path less traveled.

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²⁶ George Plathottam, SDB, *Christian Mission I the Third Millennium and the Information Superhighway: Challenges for Evangelization*, in <http://www.sedos.org/english/Plathottam.html/>, p.5.

²⁷ See Cristina Berdiskevsky, "Teaching in Cyberspace" in *Footnotes: A Publication of the American Association of University Professors*, Fall 1999.

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