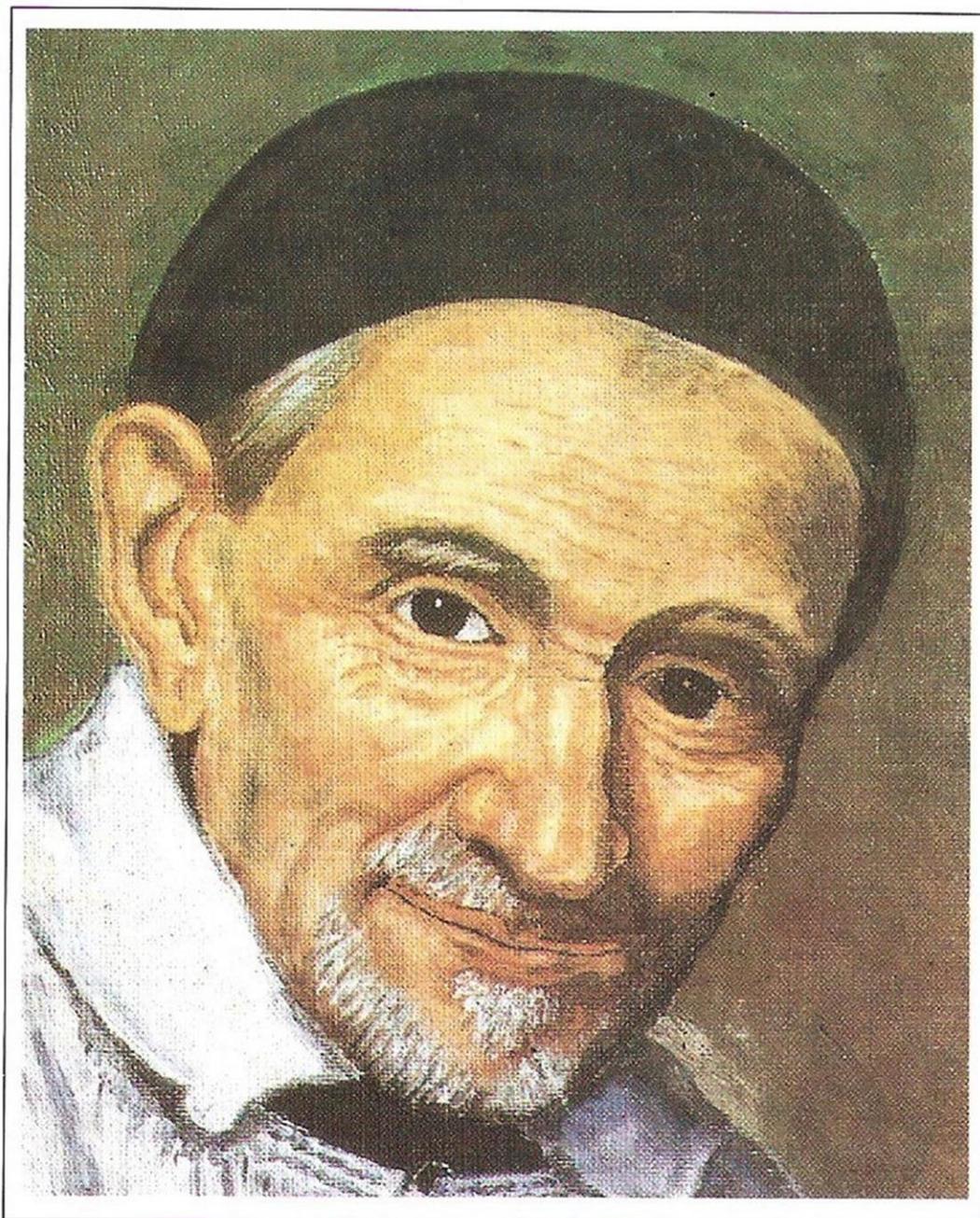


VINCENTIANA

46th YEAR - N. 2

MARCH-APRIL 2002



*Experiences of the Charism
in the C.M. Today*

CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION
GENERAL CURIA

Appointments and Confirmations by the Superior General

DATE	NAME	OFFICE	PROVINCE
01-02-2002	WILLEMS Cor	Director DC	Chinese Province
25-02-2002	ENSCH Norbert	Visitor	Germany
26-02-2002	BELLISARIO Andrew E.	Visitor	West USA
26-02-2002	ABOGADO Danilo S.	Director DC	Thailand
16-03-2002	CASTILLO Gerardo	Visitor	Costa Rica
17-04-2002	PEREIRA GOMES José Maria	Director DC	Portugal
17-04-2002	TORRES Victor	Director DC	Japan
24-04-2002	SLEDZIONA John	Visitor	USA New England
01-05-2002	SWIFT James E.	Visitor	USA Midwest
03-05-2002	CASTILLO Pedro	Subdirector General JMV	
06-05-2002	ĎUNGEL Bohumír	Director DC	Slovakia

To Vincentians throughout the world

My very dear Confreres,

May the peace of the Lord be always with you in this Lenten season!

John's account of Jesus' burial is very different from that of Mark, Matthew and Luke. Having told us that Pilate wrote a solemn inscription "Jesus the Nazorean, the King of the Jews," placed it over the head of the crucified Lord, and then defended this title against objectors (19:19-22), John gives Jesus a burial befitting a king. The significant difference in John's burial scene is the arrival of Nicodemus, who does not appear at all in the Synoptic Gospels. In John's account, he enters the stage at the side of Joseph of Arimathea (who is present in all the gospels), "bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about one hundred pounds" (19:39). Let me offer you three brief thoughts about this important Johannine figure whom the Church holds up before us every Lent.

1. Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John's third chapter is filled with baptismal allusions. That is why this dialogue is so often recounted in Lent and so frequently read in baptismal celebrations. Jesus tantalizes Nicodemus with the enigmatic saying: "I solemnly assure you, no one can see the reign of God unless he is born from above" (3:3). Then, after Jesus the teacher and Nicodemus the catechumen converse briefly about water and Spirit, John announces the central message of his gospel: "Yes, God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him may not die but may have eternal life" (3:16).

The longer I live the more convinced I become that we must continually be born "from above." All true wisdom and all true love are God's gifts. For us to be light in the world, we need the gift of God's Spirit. But a death-bearing danger lurks in the darkness: that we will gradually slide into a self-sufficiency that blinds us to our need for others and their need for us. Unless we are continually born from above, the darkness, which never ceases to menace us, gradually prevails.

St. Vincent was quite aware of this. He urged us to see everything as a gift from God and to implore God's gifts day after day. He tells us that the humble "recognize that all good which is done by them comes from God" (SV I, 182). A key Lenten question, as we renew our baptismal commitment, is this: Do we stand before God with gratitude, recognizing

that our birth and our continual rebirth are his gifts? Is thanksgiving our basic daily Christian life stance?

2. Nicodemus is a key figure in John's gospel. He is a leader among the Jews, a Pharisee. But John reminds us twice that initially he came to Jesus only by night. He was one of those authority figures (John says that there were many) who actually did believe in Jesus, but who, out of fear, held back from confessing him publicly; they "loved human glory more than God's glory" (12:43). But Jesus' death transforms Nicodemus. With a surge of courage, he emerges from the darkness into the light.

During their first meeting, Jesus had spoken symbolically with Nicodemus about darkness and light: "Those who practice evil hate the light; they do not come near it for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But those who act in truth come into the light to make clear that their deeds are done in God" (3:20-21).

Few themes are more important in John's gospel than acting in truth. Jesus is the truth (14:6). The truth sets us free (8:32). Those who act in truth come into the light (3:21). St. Vincent believed this Johannine teaching profoundly. He proposed simplicity — search for truth, hunger for truth, passion for truth, living in truth — as the first virtue of all of the groups he founded. It was his gospel (SV IX, 606). A second Lenten question is this: Is truth central in our lives, as it was for St. Vincent? Do we seek the truth continually and, like Nicodemus at the moment of the death of the Lord, do we act in the truth and thus enter into the light?

3. Nicodemus gave Jesus a stunningly royal burial, so stunning that in the course of history some scholars have tried to explain away, as a scribal error, the hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes with which he covered the body of Jesus. Today we recognize these spices as signs of Messianic abundance, like the 180 gallons of wine that Jesus miraculously produced at the wedding feast of Cana (2:6) and the 153 fish which Jesus directed the disciples to catch (21:11). A regal burial, in fact, corresponds quite harmoniously with the proclamation placed above Jesus' head that he is "king of the Jews" (19:20).

At Jesus' death, the once-fearful Nicodemus walks courageously into the spotlight on center stage and claims the crucified Lord as his own. He makes a public profession of faith in an abandoned king and gives him a royal burial. I encourage you this Lent to renew your commitment to the crucified and risen Lord who lives on in the crucified peoples of the world. A third Lenten question is this: "Is the Kingdom, inaugurated by Jesus' death and resurrection, the core of our lives? Do justice, love and

peace, which are the beacons of the Kingdom, radiate out from us like light?

The German poet Bertolt Brecht begins one of his most famous works, “To Posterity,” with these words:

*Truly, I live in dark times!...
The man who laughs
Has simply not yet had
The terrible news....*

These truly are dark times — times of international terrorism, of war in Afghanistan, of ongoing violence between Israelis and Palestinians, of threatened nuclear conflict between India and Pakistan, of unjust economic structures that oppress the poor in so many countries of the world, of political corruption that augments the ever-widening gap between the haves and the have-nots. In this context, the story of Nicodemus is wonderfully encouraging. He bursts from the darkness into the light.

John’s gospel assures us, from its very first chapter, that the light shines in the darkness and that the darkness cannot snuff it out (1:5). This Lent I urge you to believe deeply in the light and to witness by your lives to the peace, the joy, and the hope of the resurrection. Jesus, the Risen Lord, is light in the midst of darkness, joy in the midst of sorrow, hope in the midst of despair. Few messages are more important in the modern world than his gospel of hope.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.
Superior General

Prison Chaplain

*by Christian Labourse, C.M.
Province of Toulouse
Chaplain of the Prison of Cahors (France)*

Ah! My sisters, what happiness it is to serve these poor convicts, abandoned into the hands of pitiless men. I have seen these poor persons treated just like animals (SV X, 125).

Fr. Vincent said this in 1655, and today, the service of prisoners is still the service of the poor. I am not certain that they are considered and respected as they should be.

Each Tuesday morning, I go to meet the prisoners in the jail at Cahors. I am given keys to the cells and so I go to see one after the other in a simple friendly visit.

On some days, good conversations develop. On other days, when they are not feeling up to it, they do not want to talk, and so I become very discreet. I have to be attentive to what they want, such as an individual discussion, or simply, like David, a little time to pray with him. I have a small space for these individual meetings.

Every two weeks, on Saturday morning, I suggest a meeting to them. It could be the Eucharist or a sharing of the Gospel, or even a discussion on topics that they want to bring up. At these meetings, Jocelyne also takes part. She is the mother of a family, a social worker, who lives in the pastoral district for which I am responsible. Jocelyne is there for the women's section of the prison, and she, too, listens to them, and shares their sufferings, happy to be able at times to pass on a word of hope.

I have wanted to interest the Catholics of our parish community in this mission to the prisoners. Jeanne, who just recently retired, is ready to receive families who come to visit their members.

Finally, a St. Vincent Team, the modern descendants of the Ladies of Charity, has been started in our area after a parish pilgrimage to the Berceau. This team has decided to accompany the prisoners once they are released from jail. The members try to aid their reinsertion into society by finding them a job and a place to live.

This very small community works on assuring the presence of the Church among the prisoners and on being at their service. Catholic Charities also helps this presence, thereby allowing us to bring to the poorest of the prisoners a considerable financial support that is both permanent and regular. Vincent de Paul asked the same thing of the Ladies at Montmirail: *The association will take care of visiting the poor prisoners and of bringing them some alms and of having them change their shirts each Saturday* (SV XIII, 462). We do not just bring them shirts but all the clothing that they need.

With material support, fraternal presence, and spiritual comfort, we think we are answering the questions that St. Vincent asked: *Who has pity on the poor criminals abandoned by everyone? ... Do we not honor the great love of Our Lord, who helped all poor sinners, without any regard to what they had done? ...* (SV X, 114).

(JOHN RYBOLT, C.M., traslator)

The Vincentian Character of Our Apostolate in the Tanzanian Mission

by Chacko Panathara, C.M.
Province of Southern India

The International Mission in Tanzania was started in response to the call of the General Assembly of 1992 to open up new missions of the Congregation. Today it is eight and a half years since Frs. Richard Kehoe and Chacko Panathara, the two-member team of pioneers landed on this Tanzanian soil. African soil has accepted the Vincentian seed from the time of its founder and since then this sapling has thrived in many parts of this continent starting from Madagascar. But Tanzania somehow remained elusive to the Little Company until 22 September 1993. With the latest development of an understanding between the Curia and the Province of Southern India, this mission is entering its second phase of growth. As one of the pioneers of the mission, I would like to look back in general on its Vincentian characteristics manifested in the different areas of its growth up until today.

1. Discernment of the Mission

According to St. Vincent, our Founder, there are four elements involved in the discernment of a mission or an apostolate: the needs, events, obedience and prayer.¹ St. Vincent summed up all these in the imitation of Jesus, by doing the Will of God, as he puts it in the Common Rules.²

In the case of this International Mission, I would see the reflection of these four elements in this way:

Needs: There was a call for the Little Company to Tanzania from the year 1980, from the Sisters of Mercy of St. Vincent de Paul founded in Untermarchtal, Germany, and established in Tanzania, in the Diocese of Mbinga.

Events: The General Assembly of 1992 with its Theme “ New Evangelization, New Men and New Communities” was an event that opened up new vistas of evangelization for the Congregation.

Obedience: The “Missions *Ad Gentes*” of the Congregation was in obedience and response to the Call of our missionary Pope to “Evangelization 2000.”

¹Slawson, Douglas, C.M., “Vincent’s Discernment of His Own Vocation and of the Congregation.”

²Common Rules II, 3; see also the conference “On Conformity to the Will of God” of 15 October 1655.

Prayer: The Congregation as one family, united in prayer in the General Assembly, made this decision for the new missions *ad gentes*.³

This Apostolate is an expression of the Congregation's *preferential option for the poor*⁴ which was reiterated in the General Assembly of 1992, and that too in "evangelizing the poor, especially the most abandoned."⁵

Mpepai was an out station from the time of the German missionaries and had still remained an out station and not a parish since there was no priest to go to that area for a permanent stay, an area and people forlorn and abandoned, remote and difficult.⁶ Now in tune with our charism and characteristics, Mpepai has become the first parish of the Vincentians in Tanzania. This option is a challenge and calls for inculturation and conversion to the lifestyle of the poor for a better witnessing to Jesus, Evangelizer of the Poor.

*This mission is missionary in character,*⁷ reflecting clearly the characteristics outlined by Fr. Robert Maloney, C.M in his presentation.

International: This mission, being a response to the call to the missions *ad gentes* of the worldwide Congregation, will maintain its international characteristic by keeping open its doors to Vincentian confreres and Vincentian laity from any part of the world to work together in following Jesus, the Evangelizer of the Poor.

A Mobile Evangelizer: The Tanzanian mission has given a boost to the Vincentian presence in East Africa. And with much more of a conscious effort of collaboration among the Vincentian families present in these areas, this mission can take up the lead role of a mobile evangelizer "with fire in the heart to spread the Good News."⁸

Learning Languages: The late Julius Comparage Nyrere, Father of the Nation, has brought the warring tribes under the shade of a single culture, a culture based on one language, that is, Swahili. Learning the language and culture of the people is given priority in the preparation of the missionaries for this mission.

³Robert P. Maloney, "My Hopes for the Congregation for the Next Five Years" 1993.

⁴Constitution 12, 1°.

⁵Constitution 1, 2°.

⁶Robert P. Maloney, Mission Appeal Letter 1 October 1994.

⁷Robert P. Maloney presentation to the participants of CIF "On Being A Missionary Today" on 22 October 1994.

⁸*Ibid.*

Inculturation: The land of Tanzania and its people are quite rich in their culture and customs. However the Catholic religion brought by westerners almost hundred years ago still remains western stuff. Perhaps the call to inculturation in their liturgy, lifestyle, and learning could be a challenge before us to put our efforts and energy toward a meaningful ministry in this mission.

Be creative, joyful and social: In order to serve the people better we need to know their needs. To know their needs we need to have constant contact with them. The confreres, in consultation with the community, develop programmes in their pastoral ministry, which will keep them in constant, meaningful and effective contact with the people. Thus we shall define our work with the people through a creative, joyful, social atmosphere, and means.

The Sponsorship Programme of Child Care International, now running in all our four stations of Mpepai, Mbinga, Mbangamao, and Bombambilli, is helping almost 150 very poor and needy families in the education of their children and development of those individual families. Nursery schools conducted for the benefit of the poor little ones are just one of such defined ministries we are involved in through creative, joyful and social means of involvement with the people.

Evangelization is Liberation. It is liberation from all states of bondage and all clutches of poverty, be it economical, psychological or intellectual. To bring this about the confreres themselves are convinced that our people have the power and ability to do it and take all measures to convince them of this fact. The people of Bombambilli, one of our Vincentian stations, collected almost seven million Tanzanian Shillings for making a belfry and a grotto of the Miraculous Medal within a period of one year, which would have been unthinkable and just a dream for them some years back. As Archbishop Norbert Mtega of Songea himself pointed out “This belfry and grotto are indeed spectacular, not only in their beautiful construction, but also in their being a sign of our people’s power and their ability to do it.”⁹ A sign of change from the naïve situation they were basking in for so long. This incident has been a challenge to the villages and parishes around to put their efforts together to help themselves and the Church.

Common Prayer: Called to be “Carthusians at home and apostles outside” confreres, although they are living alone in their respective areas of pastoral ministry due to lack of personnel, make it a point to meet once every three months to pray and reflect together and to get enriched from each other’s company, common prayer and fellowship.

⁹Talk of the Archbishop at the blessing of the Belfry and the Grotto on 9 December 2001.

In this way, I find the **missionary character** of this mission in line with the thoughts of Fr. Robert Maloney, our Superior General.¹⁰

2. Formation of the Clergy

“Formation of the clergy is the work of the Congregation from its very beginnings”¹¹ and the fact is again reiterated in the 38th General Assembly when it stated its commitment “to give a privileged place to the formation of priests”¹² and “the new missions that we are undertaking in the Solomon Islands and Tanzania, have possible links with further involvement in the formation programmes”¹³ as Fr. Maloney expressed in his hopes for the Congregation in the next five years. In Tanzania, this fact led the confreres to delve into vocation promotion and the formation of our own indigenous candidates for the mission from the very start. We realized the fact that the Church in Tanzania is no more a Church of missionaries, but is rather a Missionary Church, or rather a Church welling up to be a Missionary Church in the third millennium. And so, to have indigenous candidates with us in the community would be credible for us before the Church in Tanzania. Today we have five candidates: four for Priesthood, and one for Brotherhood.

3. Collaboration with Vincentian Family Members

The presence of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of St. Vincent de Paul, who maintain and cherish the spirit and charism of St. Vincent, is another Vincentian characteristic of the Tanzanian Mission. Our service to them is in consonance with our Constitutions¹⁴ primarily and it was all the more emphasized at the 39th General Assembly, when it said “On the threshold of the new millennium, the Congregation of the Mission, together with the Vincentian Family, wishes to fulfill Isaiah’s prophecy by making it a reality today, for it is our motto.”¹⁵ As part of the Vincentian Family, the Sisters of Mercy of St. Vincent de Paul based in Untermarchtal, Germany, and in Mbinga, Tanzania, have a right to our Vincentian assistance and to go along with us hand in hand to the realization of Isaiah’s prophecy, making it a reality in this part of the world. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul was started for the first time in the Diocese of Mbinga after the confreres came here, thanks to the initial efforts of Fr. Myles. It now has grown into a Particular Council.

¹⁰Robert P. Maloney, presentation to the CIF participants on “On Being a Missionary Today” of 22 October 1994.

¹¹Constitution 15, § 1.

¹²Letter to the Confreres, 25 July 1992, New Evangelization No. 3.

¹³Robert P. Maloney, “Some Hopes for the Congregation of the Mission,” No.3

¹⁴Constitutions 1, 3° on formation of the laity and 17on direction of the Daughters of Charity.

¹⁵Final Document of the 39th General Assembly July 1998, Introduction.

4. The need for a community for the mission

Vincent realized the need for a community after he started preaching the missions. Community came as a subsequent need for the mission. So also the need and call to strengthen the community in Tanzania came as a result of the pastoral need. The community began with Frs. Richard Kehoe from the United States and Chacko Panathara from India, who started the mission in 1993. The Indian Province was flexible in its readiness to the need and call of the Congregation by sending Frs. James Theikanath, Prakash Tirkey, and Johnson Nedungaden in subsequent years. The mission kept its international character of being open to the confreres from around the world and from different provinces, when it received in its embrace Frs. Myles Rearden from Ireland, Manuel Prado from Puerto Rico, Jose Manjaly from the Province of Northern India, Jacob Panthappallil, James Kunninpurayidam, and Jaimy Moonjely, all from Province of Southern India. Though some of these missionaries had to go back to their provinces, as the province needed them there, the rest are deeply involved in their mission in Tanzania. The recent understanding of the General Curia with the Province of Southern India has been a shot in the arm for the mission to strengthen this community with more personnel, making long-term plans for the growth of the mission in the coming years.

5. Guidance through the events

On 7 July 1994, during the visit of Fr. Maloney to Tanzania, he informed me that my superior and companion Dick would be going back to his province soon, and so he planned to close down this new international mission, since I would have to be alone until he found new companions for me on the mission. He gave me options to any other international missions. We sat in calmness, prayed and I made the decision to stay and said to Fr. Maloney “We should stay here in Tanzania. Fr. Dick and I have struggled a great deal in this first year, trying to learn the language, to adapt to the culture, to deal with loneliness. We cannot let all that labor and pain to go to waste. Now the people in the remote parish where I am working are responding with great enthusiasm. There are numerous candidates for priesthood in this area. We should build on this foundation.”¹⁶ Henceforth our discussions were on how to go about reviving the mission.

That sudden “Spirit-inspired decision,” as I would call it and as I do believe, was the zeal and fire of the spirit of St. Vincent inspiring us, as he did,¹⁷ when he was almost pressurized to close down the Madagascar mission. God thus guiding the mission through its events is a clear expression of its Vincentian characteristic.

¹⁶Robert P. Maloney, Mission Appeal Letter of 1 October 1994.

¹⁷Repetition of Prayer, N° 171 of 25 August 1657 and Repetition of Prayer, N° 172 of 30 August 1657.

6. We have no right to refuse what people give us out of love for God¹⁸

As the Congregation expanded, Vincent realized that the Community needs a solid financial basis in order to provide for the needs of its members, and also to ensure freedom of action in the apostolate. The capital sum donated at the foundation of the Company by the Gondis was invested in land.

The Tanzanian Mission has also not refused what people give us for the love of God so as to manage our day-to-day expenses from the income from its ministries. Its main sources of income are its ministry to the Sisters, Mass stipends, and sometimes the Mission Fund distribution from Rome, local contributions from our pastoral ministries in the dioceses. Besides it has laid its foundation by way of investment in land in strategic places in the country, like in Morogoro town, Songea, and Mbinga, which will help the mission to build and grow in the future.

7. Encounter with the Poor

After being 17 years a priest, a radical change came in the life of St. Vincent, as we see him in contact with the poor in 1617 in Gannes, Folleville, and in Châtillon-les-Dombes. This encounter with the poor paved the path for his great foundations in the Church, on the missions, and in works of charity.¹⁹

Perhaps it was a mere chance that I happened to be in Mpepai as its first resident priest before the visit of Fr. Maloney to Tanzania. In my lonely parish life in Mpepai, I was having the feelings of the Pastor of Clichy in 1612, who expressed to Cardinal de Retz “neither the Holy Father or you, Your Eminence, could be as happy as I am.”²⁰ The response of the people, as Fr. Maloney witnessed,²¹ and their response to the sacramental life and to their life of faith, indeed all these were important elements to encourage us to take a decision to live up to their response and enthusiasm. Today the change that is taking place in the life of the people of our parishes, spiritually and materially, has to be seen as a sign of the lively presence of the Vincentians in this part of the world, characterized by their Vincentian charism.

¹⁸José María Román, C.M., *St. Vincent de Paul, A Biography*, Chapter XVI.

¹⁹Constitutions, Introduction, p. 2.

²⁰Román, *op.cit.*, p 103.

²¹Robert P. Maloney, Mission Appeal Letter of 1 October 1994.

A Parish on Top of a Garbage Hill
(Parish of Ina ng Lupang Pangako, Quezon City, Philippines)

by Rolando S. DelaGoza, C.M.
Procurator General to the Holy See

Nestled on top of a hill, surrounded by the mansions of the rich, imposing shopping malls, and the National Legislative Building (Batasang Pambansa), the parish of our Lady of the Land of Promise (Ina ng Lupang Pangako) is indeed an ambivalent symbol of Christian hope. Thousands of its parishioners come from many islands (the Philippines has over 7,000 islands) hoping for a better life: work, education, social life, economic upliftment, etc. Strange to say, these people have to suffer a worse state in life than they would ever have imagined and which is unimaginable to people who come from the first world. For, before they could even find a job, they have to suffer the indignity of living on top of a garbage pile that could easily dwarf the small hills of Rome. It fell on the Vincentian Fathers and the Daughters of Charity to offer hope to this underprivileged and marginalized people of a huge super-metropolis, which is the city of Manila (population 12 million).

The Place

It was in 1991 that the Vincentians formed a community in Payatas, after Cardinal Sin offered the parish to the Sons of St. Vincent de Paul. Before that there were Jesuits and some other groups who worked there but it fell on the missionaries to set up a full parish with the programs needed to make such a poor place a Christian center of hope.

One has to see it in order to believe how people could live, could work, could breathe or even just eke out a living from a pile of garbage. The garbage is part of the refuse from the houses, the hotels, the schools, the factories, the slaughterhouses, the marketplaces right at the center of Metro Manila of which Quezon City is only a part. The pile of garbage is as much a part of the people's hope, maybe more so, than projects of the government and the Church combined. For from the beginning, when both the Church and the state were not giving hope to these exiled people, they already found solace and support from the garbage.

How can a pile of garbage be a symbol of hope?

When one sees dozens of huge trucks ramble along the city roads, one is consoled by the thought that some of the bad odor, the putrid meat, or the eyesores are gone from the neighborhood. But when the same trucks arrive in

Payatas, the people are consoled by the hope of earning a living and getting money for the education of their children. When people see a garbage dump they generally run away from the place, but when the scavengers of Payatas see a garbage truck, they run, even at danger to their lives, in order to be the first to take something precious or at least a thing of value for their daily lives. When one sees a cardboard box on a pile of garbage, one thinks of some precious computer or refrigerator that it once contained but the scavengers think of the possibility of taking the same box to a Chinese store to be exchanged for a few cents. The same could be said of a plastic bag, a piece of metal, an iron or tin can, a cloth, a beautiful piece of paper, a book, etc. They all become symbols of hope for the poorest of the poor.

The environmental risks

One could imagine millions upon millions of microbes, germs and insects bearing hundreds of diseases in the hot tropical climate. But if one can imagine all the garbage, thousands of trucks dumped in a few hectares of land, then the environmental risks are far worse than imagined by the scientists of the world. The monsoon rains that drip by drip pour on the garbage not only wash the tiny huts and utensils used by the scavengers, they also contaminate the water sources around the area. The people and their children's children have to forcibly drink from this sole source of water. But that is only one of the risks. The putrid smell, the eternal smoke, the wind, the humidity all contribute to making the place a true hell on earth.

The Vincentians

Since taking over the Parish in Payatas, a dozen Vincentians have been assigned there, many of them got sick and one lay brother died. In addition to taking care of the spiritual needs of the parishioners through the administration of the sacraments: daily Masses, confessions, etc., they have become social workers, defenders of the poor, organizers and factotum for the people. Their work days have no fixed hours, for even in the dead of the night, they have to wake up to the call of the wounded or the sick, victims of the criminal environment of the area. Stories of persons getting killed or wounded after a drinking spree, persons drugged who have to be taken to the hospital, poor without transportation who need the priests to drive them to the hospital.

In the beginning, the Vincentians stayed in a poor house, no better than the house of the poor who live in the area and celebrated Mass in a small makeshift chapel. Little by little, with the cooperation of the people, they built a chapel which could hold several hundred persons for daily Mass and the very animated well-orchestrated Sunday Mass. During the years, when this writer visited the parish several times, he observed the progress in the parish not only in

the physical appearance of the chapel but also in the welcoming attitude of the people around the area. They have benefitted from the programs, the prayers, the expertise of the priests and the sisters who made the parish located on top of the pile of garbage their own.

As mentioned above, the health hazards are very great; there is no scientific measurement done of the place but one's imagination is fired up just looking at the piles of garbage. Through the years, most of the priests who were assigned there got sick, many of bad pulmonary and related diseases. One lay brother died at a very young age. Thanks to the Lord, many of the priests and sisters would somehow be immunized and after a few years are able to resist the very terrible inconveniences and risks of living on top of a garbage dump.

The Programs

It is a great tribute to human ingenuity and perseverance that the parish on top of the garbage is fast becoming a real symbol of hope. Andrea Soco of the Institute on Church and Social Issues wrote an article, "Power from the Poor," summarizing the programs being implemented in Payatas and replicated in other parts of the Philippines:

"Twelve months ago, the country was shocked when a mountain of garbage collapsed and buried hundreds of informal settlers living at its foot. The event happened in Payatas, an area better known as a symbol of the nation's poverty. Today, people are still getting killed by minor landslides. Men, women and children continue to endure the stench of garbage and scavenge for a living. The dump still looms over the area, reminding residents of the tragedy a year ago and of their poverty.

But Payatas has another face – one that is filled with hope, as its residents carry on a slum upgrading project, a project that will be financed mainly by the residents' savings. While this month marks the anniversary of the trash slide, it also signals the possibilities of a partnership between the poor and the private sector. Earlier this week, the Asian Development Bank granted the Payatas community \$2,32 million as assistance for the project. Even without the grant, however, residents will still push through with slum upgrading. They, after all, have savings.

Long before the tragedy, Payatas residents were already implementing a savings and loan program initiated by the Vincentian Missionaries Social Development Foundation, Inc. This program enabled those with very little income, such as scavengers, to save and borrow for various purposes. Wilma, a member, maintained that she was able to send her children to school and buy a sewing machine through her savings.

Many other savings programs have been operating in Payatas since the 1990s. One of these is the savings for land and housing, which is specifically for land acquisition and housing purposes. Through such programs, residents have been able to address the seemingly unsurmountable urban poor problems of landlessness and the lack of tenure security.

Poor communities across the country have replicated the Payatas savings model in their areas. Many of these communities, the Kabalika Homeowners' Association in Iloilo, for instance, which is composed of very poor informal settlers, have already ventured into land acquisition. These cases show that the poor have resources that they can mobilize given the right push. As Maitet Diokno, president of the Freedom from Debt Coalition, mentioned in a forum on the Post-Estrada Reform Agenda, "There is big money in little people."

The government, however, and indeed many of us, see the poor as problems and not as partners in development. Hence, despite all the poverty-alleviation strategies thrown about, the majority of the population are still mired in poverty. If the goal is to reduce poverty, we must recognize the poor's capacity to mobilize resources and see the poor as human resources. Unless this happens, policies to fight poverty will merely be theoretical because these will not be about the poor but about figures – poverty incidence, unemployment rate, etc. – and about making a good impression on the public.

The same goes for poverty alleviation and reduction programs. Recently, the government and various sectors of society have been holding dialogues and workshops on poverty reduction but no new approach has been suggested. If the government keeps on doing what it has been doing or what past administrations have done, then it is likely that very little will be achieved" (Philippine Daily Inquirer, 16 July 2001, p. 9).

Vincentian Missionaries Social Development Foundation Incorporated (VMSDFI), Manila

The "Philippines Homeless People's Federation" with 20,000 member families is one of the distinctive and specific projects of the Vincentian Missionaries Social Development Foundation Inc. (VMSDFD). The main purpose of the federation is to help and guide families to save, negotiate secure land, form homeowner associations, identify sites on which they could build and search sources of loans and negotiate with the government with clearly costed proposals (Environment & Urbanization Vol. 13, no. 2, October 2001, p. 73). Way back in 1995, the Vincentians started the program in Payatas for the purpose of encouraging people to save and thus gain the capacity of building their own homes. The Payatas savings project, called "Lupang Pangako Savings

Association” has saved around 15 million pesos for micro-enterprises and is preparing for land acquisition.

Helped by the VMSDF, the Philippines Homeless People’s Federation has worked hard to acquire land and housing through various means:

- Saving for land and houses;
- Designing affordable houses and community layouts, using design workshops, model house exhibits and exchanges to sharpen people’s building skills and increase design options;
- Understanding the legal aspects of land acquisition, existing finance programs, land title and land conversion issues;
- Researching ownership records and negotiating to lease or buy land already occupied by settlements at affordable rates;
- Surveying unused government-owned land as potential housing sites, creating an inventory of potential relocation sites for poor people living in problem areas;
- Exploring other land and housing options in collaboration with the government, private landowners, finance institutions, international organizations and NGOs, to develop comprehensive, city-wide land and housing options which work for the poor and for the city (Environment & Urbanization, p. 80).

The various savings groups are linked into a national federation through which ideas, expertise, information and resources are created in one community. From its humble beginnings in the Parish on the Garabage Hill, the idea has spread to the three important regions of the Philippines: Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao. In fact, during its 1998 national assembly, 1,000 local members and 200 community leaders from Cebu, Mandaue, Calbayog, Samar, Iloilo, Davao, Surigao, General Santos, Bicol and Metro Manila gathered to discuss the future of this important project for the poor.

Conclusion

“Ina ng Lupang Pangako Parish,” or the “Our Lady of the Promised Land Parish” has gone a long way in helping the poorest of the poor who eke out their living by scavenging among the refuse of the mega-city of Manila. With 12 million people, Manila and its surrounding cities attract thousands upon thousands of immigrants from the far-flung islands of the Philippines, people who pin their hope of a better tomorrow on work and education for their children. In Manila, their dreams oftentimes become nightmares, their hopes turned into despair. The small light that guided this people came with the creation of a Vincentian parish with its numerous pro-poor projects which have become models for the whole Philippines. Through the intercession of the “Mother of the

Land of Hope” (Ina ng Lupang Pangako), the poor now have a chance to have a better life and a better future for their children.

The Vincentian Mission in the Solomon Islands

This report is based on an article first written by Raphael Sucaldito, C.M., two years before his death in July 2000. It has been edited and updated by Jack Harris, C.M.

The popular image of the Solomon Islands is that of a beautiful, unspoiled paradise with glimmering emerald lagoons, jagged coral reefs, orchid-laden jungles, thundering waterfalls, forested peaks and native villages on stilts. To some extent this is true, and the people are strikingly handsome with their smooth chocolate-coloured skin. In the jungle villages, many women go around topless while the men wear a traditional grass skirt or “kabilato.” Many men and women wear permanent markings cut into the skin of their faces when they are babies as trademarks of their tribal identity.

The people are gentle, friendly and easy-going but the islands have had a surprisingly violent history, with volcanic eruptions, tribal wars, slave trading and very early missionaries have been cooked and eaten by local people. The islands once earned the title “terrible Solomons.”

During the Second World War, one of the largest islands and the sea around it became the scene of one of the fiercest battles in history, leaving thousands of Americans and Japanese soldiers dead. War Memorials honouring both sides overlook the capital city of Honiara today and they are grim reminders of the terrible conflict that lasted two full years. The words ‘Guadalcanal’ and ‘Coral Sea’ bring back horrific memories to war veterans around the world and the wrecks of US and Japanese ships lie at the bottom of the sea off Honiara in an area now named ‘Iron Bottom Sound.’

Geographically Solomon Islands is part of a one-thousand-island chain stretching from Papua New Guinea to Fiji, known as Melanesia. Its first inhabitants came from New Guinea and Europeans did not arrive until 1568 when the Spanish explorer Alvaro de Mendana de Neyra arrived. He had read an ancient Incan legend about “islands of gold” 5000 kilometres west of Peru. Mendana called the islands “King Solomon’s Islands” but he failed to find any gold and he got a cool reception from hostile local people. The Spanish abandoned the islands and because Mendana had made a mistake in positioning them on the map, no one found the Solomon Islands again until the British came in 1767 and set up a colony.

The islands were believed to be very dangerous especially when the slave trade began and local people were taken to work in Australia and other countries by traders known as “blackbirders.” The locals retaliated by butchering, cooking and eating anyone who stopped by and this included early missionaries and shipwrecked sailors.

The islands became a UK protectorate and remained under British control until independence in 1978 when they became a Commonwealth Parliamentary Democracy in which a Governor General represents Queen Elizabeth II. Decision-making power, however, lies in the hands of a Prime Minister and the national Parliament.

Most of the population of 408,000 is Christian and this seems a little surprising considering how primitive the beliefs were before and how violent the locals could be with one another and with outsiders. Christians today make up 80% of the population. The Anglicans form 30%, the biggest group, followed by the Catholics at 25%, the Seventh Day Adventists who have 20% and then the Baptists, South Sea Evangelicals and a few smaller groups.

Christianity however, has not managed to fully suppress the ancient rivalries between islands and tribes; ethnic violence erupted again in December 1998. Rival ethnic armed groups, the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF), the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM) and the Royal Solomon Islands Police Service were in conflict for over two years. The situation worsened considerably in June 2000 when the MEF staged a coup, overthrowing the elected government. A so-called “cease-fire” had little effect on the violence. Armed groups burned thousands of civilians out of their homes. Civilians as well as fighters were killed or injured, tortured, threatened and harassed. To understand the root causes of the conflict it is useful to know how the population is distributed around the islands.

The majority of Solomon Islands people are concentrated on two Islands – Guadalcanal and Malaita and after World War II thousands of Malaitans moved over to Guadalcanal and to this day, there are unresolved differences over land ownership and use. Malaitans are more aggressive and industrious than the “laid-back” Guadalcanal people and this has also caused friction, reviving age-old envy and rivalry between the two islands.

A peace agreement signed at Townsville in Australia brought some easing of the tension, but details like the handing in of arms and the composition of the police force are still causing problems. Questions of compensation and the relocation of displaced people are ongoing at the time of writing (March 2002) and a freely elected government is in place. The Solomon Islands used to be known as the “Happy Isles,” but since the ethnic tension began this is not an accurate description any more. In the market place, faces that were once smiling are now fearful and suspicious. Where once there was openness and trust, now people are nervous and reserved.

Honiara is still a safe place though because, thankfully, the conflict has not developed into the ethnic cleansing of Rwanda or Kosovo or East Timor, nor has there been the outbreak of criminal lawlessness that continues to beset Papua New Guinea’s capital Port Moresby.

This is the setting in which the Vincentian Mission is taking root, following in the footsteps of Catholic missionaries who first evangelized the people here only a hundred years ago. The French Marists came first and they were followed by their confreres from New Zealand, Australia and the US. Later the Dominicans worked in the Western part of the Solomon Islands and more recently the Missionary Society of the Philippines and the Salesians have joined in. There are three dioceses: the Archdiocese of Honiara has 12 native diocesan priests; the Diocese of Auki in Malaita has 15 native priests and the Diocese of Gizo in the west has 2 native priests.

The Marists are not sending any new missionaries and at the moment have no seminarians in formation; those who remain are getting on in years or are retired. There are very few vocations to religious life, but a good number to diocesan priesthood. Celibacy seems too great a challenge for many young Solomon Islanders and with a low tolerance to alcohol many become problem drinkers, so formators have some difficulties with which to work. These problems, along with culture differences, low educational achievement and the poor economic situation in the seminarians' families, make seminary work very challenging.

The Congregation of the Mission took on this challenge in 1993 and was warmly welcomed when the first confreres arrived. Fr. Marcelo Manimtim from the Philippines and Fr. Tom Hynes from the US were the pioneers. Before starting into the formation work they spent one and a half years helping in a parish in Takwa in North Malaita, mainly to acquaint themselves with the culture and language of the islands. In 1995 they moved to a lay ministry centre called Nazareth Apostolic Centre (NAC) in Guadalcanal and they were joined by Fr. Stanislaus Reksosusilo from Indonesia. The centre trained lay leaders and catechists, but was host to the infant seminary until its site just next door was prepared. Fr. Marcelo and Fr. Tom undertook the task of working with architects and builders to create the new Holy Name of Mary Seminary. They dealt patiently with delays and a few disagreements over contracts and left us with a fine set of practical and durable buildings. The construction took two years and the students and confreres made the half-a-kilometer move in 1997. The buildings are spread over a generous-sized campus with 14 separate structures: 4 staff houses, 4 student dormitories with six study-bedrooms in each; a chapel, library, three class-halls and a kitchen/dining hall. Fr. Marcelo set up a programme of studies along with spiritual and pastoral activities, which helped develop the full potential of each member of a very mixed ability group. Fr. Tom, with his deep devotion to our Lady and the Little Flower, is still remembered with great affection by many of our past-men.

In 1999 Fr. Tom Hynes returned to the US and Fr. Rafael Sucaldito took his place. He became spiritual director and organiser of pastoral activities and he made a deep impression on the seminarians who to this day can still quote many of his conferences and homilies; he also made an enormous contribution to the social life of the new seminary and the physical fitness of the students by building a tennis court. Anyone who faced him across the net found him a formidable opponent. As a community man he was warm and

unassuming and an absolute wizard with a gas cooker. He would treat us to the most wonderful Filipino cuisine and then hammer us to pieces on the tennis court! His visit to the Philippines in May 2000 coincided with the build up of tension here that led to the coup in June. All flights to the Solomon Islands were cancelled, so he was left stranded in Australia where he became ill, with what seemed at first to be a straightforward infection.

Sadly it was much more serious, and we lost a valued member of our community in early July. The confreres in Australia were exceptional in their care for him in his final illness. May he rest in peace.

Just before Raffy's illness the new millennium had opened with the return of Fr. Reksosusilo to Indonesia. He is remembered as a brilliant and clear-thinking philosopher. He was also the seminary bursar and had the delicate task of keeping the seminarians well fed and at the same time balancing a budget. He was replaced by Fr. Jack Harris from Ireland whose interests include communications, media work and electrical engineering.

To date Fr. Jack has improved the seminary's electrical facilities by building a small power station and he has introduced the seminarians to religious broadcasting on the national radio.

He had just done one term of teaching when the ethnic tension deepened and the seminary had to close. Fr. Jack and Fr. Marcelo stayed and protected the seminary buildings while we nearly had World War III going on outside our gate. There were killings and horrific injuries all around us, but we were safe. It was inconvenient to have no electric power, very little food and a lot of time on our hands, but thankfully we survived it all and our seminarians did pastoral work at home under the supervision of their local priests.

Then Fr. Marek Owskiak arrived from Poland in January 2001 to set up and direct the special Spiritual Year programme and oversee the spiritual direction of the rest of the students. He is young and energetic and thinks nothing of jogging ten kilometres. He launched the Spiritual Year Programme for students who had already done one or two years in Bomana in Papua New Guinea. They came to us in the seminary, but the rest of our students remained in their home villages for a further few months to let things really settle down.

When term did begin again we were joined by Fr. Agustinus Marsup from Indonesia who like Fr. Rekso is a philosopher and like Fr. Raffy is a brilliant cook. He is director of students and he coordinates their pastoral work. He also has the thankless task of community bursar which in an international group consists of catering for widely different tastes, and he does it with quiet and unassuming efficiency.

Fr. Marcelo's term of office came to an end in 2001 and he returned to the Philippines having charted out the course for Holy Name of Mary Seminary and

supervised the development of its structures and programmes. He did not want a highly regimented system of training, but a trusting and encouraging environment in which students had an input and felt involved, so that they could take responsibility for their growth in maturity and relationship with God. He left behind him a well organised and integrated, happy place in which the future needs of the Church in this part of Melanesia are in sure hands. His place was taken by his Filipino confrere Fr. Frank Vargas who has continued to develop the infrastructures that Marcelo put in place and his arrival has coincided not only with a big reduction in the ethnic tension, but also with an unprecedented growth in the intake of seminarians. Every room is in use with 28 seminarians, five of whom are in the Spirituality Year and live with their director Fr. Marek in a house at NAC. This large number puts pressure on all our facilities, but it has not changed the relaxing, yet challenging, atmosphere.

The formation work is challenging because of culture differences and the mixed abilities of our students who come from a wide variety of academic and religious backgrounds. We have to be very sensitive to the native culture and try to understand local customs in order to gain the confidence and trust of the islanders. Teaching takes patience, but the seminarians are eager and willing to learn. They are mature and relate well with authority, so that discipline poses no problem, but one aspect of Melanesian culture can be disconcerting. This is the tendency to be always willing to please, and not say anything they think might not be acceptable. Often they will tell you what they think you want to hear, rather than what they really think or want to do!

The seminary is in a very real sense a community or family, as we have a community of local sisters, a single sister from an international community and a family living on the campus. The local sisters are called Daughters of Mary Immaculate and were founded by a Marist bishop in the Solomon Islands in 1931. Our sisters here take care of catering for the students and the confreres and they make an important contribution to the guidance and direction of the students because of their first hand knowledge of local culture and customs. So too does the young married man who looks after maintenance and lives in the seminary compound with his wife and children. The other sister is a Marist (SMSM) and she is on the teaching staff. She runs the library and counselling courses as well as teaching scripture and general theology.

Seminary formation here takes seven years to complete. Students for the three Solomon Islands dioceses spend three years at Holy Name of Mary Seminary where philosophy and theology courses are integrated in the curriculum. After this they stay here for their spiritual year before proceeding to Bomana in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea where they do the last three years of formation before ordination to diaconate and priesthood. Finding staff for the seminary in Bomana has been a problem for many years and at one stage they had one priest doing the job of rector, procurator and dean of students, with no one to look after their spiritual needs.

The formation apostolate by the Congregation of the Mission is becoming an integral part of the Church in Melanesia and will no doubt be of great help in building, but also perhaps in saving, the future of the Church in this part of the world. At the moment, no province takes direct responsibility for the mission in the Solomon Islands, so assignment to work here is on a voluntary basis. The tenure of assignment is indefinite as long as we have the willingness and the health and ability to withstand the challenges of the work.

Cuba: In a State of Evangelization *Between Fear and Hope*

*by Jesús María Lusarreta, C.M.
Province of Cuba*

Cuba, for almost half a century, has been the center of attention of millions of people. Some have seen in this small island a garden of roses, others a modern-day battleground between David and Goliath. The figure of Che Guevara has been given a special prominence, and the voice of Comandante Fidel has been heard extensively all over the globe.

And the Church and the C.M., what have they done in the meantime?

In Cuba the Church seems like a deforested mountainside. The lumberjacks arrived and indiscriminately cut down all the trees, large and small. The large trees were exported, the small ones burned. Now no more trees remain in the forest... But, suddenly, as a result of the sun and water, the roots that remained, since nature is powerful, opened up a space between the cement and the rocks and new shoots sprouted up. They cut down the trees, but they did not dry out the roots, and at the first opportunity, they bloomed.

Cuba is not an atheistic country. There has been an absence of God, for quite a long time his name was not mentioned, his presence was avoided, but God remained necessary. Then the sunshine of John Paul II arrived. They allowed the plants to be watered. As though they had opened up a spring that had been blocked, water sprung up and the forest turned green again, filling the plazas. Though it was surrounded by thorns, the blossom of hope budded. The Church lives, breathes, moves. She is herself.

In these 40 years, the C.M. has gone from 52 members to ten, and at one point in time, there were only five; from 12 houses to five; from a well-known missionary activity to the maintenance of 3 parishes, 2 churches and one house removed from the city for our three students and their formation director. In our houses of the C.M. there were four associations of the Vincentian Family but ... the only one remaining is the Association of the Miraculous Medal. The others have completely disappeared. But the spirit is alive and in our five houses these four associations have once again burst into bloom: the AIC, the Vincentian Marian Youth, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, and the Association of the Miraculous Medal.

Pope John Paul II has been the most fantastic missionary to set foot in Cuba in all time. He began his visit by telling us, “Do not be afraid, the Lord is with us.” It was the marvelous living experience of the disciples of Emmaus with the Master. Do not be afraid, after the purification will come the green springtime of hope: “May Cuba open up to the world, and the world open up to Cuba.”

Our little company, thanks to his visit, has just begun a new project. The C.M. had gone from five confreres and five houses to nine members. Now we could have a community life and we could also dream of helping the Vincentian Family grow according to its own charism. In our Provincial Assembly, with the whole province gathered around a small table, and with the joy of those who feel young and enthusiastic, we opted for a missionary province that would have all of its houses in a permanent state of mission and directly serve the poor. This would be our external sign and identification.

- Where there is a missionary, that there be direct service of the poor;
- Where there is a missionary, that the Gospel be preached progressively, going beyond the physical structure of the church;
- In our houses, so that the Gospel may be more effective, the associations of the Vincentian Family be organized, so that the Family might be rebuilt and along with its members, the number of missionaries would increase;
- That the poor be welcomed in our houses, and in order to achieve this, we do the works that they need and which we are allowed to do, without omitting ever “the sweat of our brow and the strength of our arms”;
- That we open up to ask for contributions that will help us in our mission ... using the contacts we have, and the help of our brothers and sisters.

Like a small army of enthusiastic soldiers, we began our task. That in our houses there be associations of the Vincentian Family, that we recover the books in disuse, that the poor come to our houses with trust, that.... From the churches of La Merced and La Milagrosa in Havana, as pioneers, to the eastern provinces, the news was spread that the poor began coming to eat, the Vincentian associations began to work, the missions began to bear fruit ... and even vocations began to come forward. We are not allowed to do much, we move about within the walls of the church, but we are moving....

The first parish to take flight was **La Medalla Milagrosa**. In the parish two works of evangelization began at the same time: an extensive mission, and an open day-residence for the elderly with a capacity to serve 175 needy elderly. The work in our social conditions seemed to be a utopian dream. *But when God reveals himself clearly in favor of the poor, nothing is impossible.*

The *first objective* is to create the missionary condition necessary in the parish so that, person by person, all who live in the territory of the parish can be reached with the invitation of the Gospel. A parish in a permanent state of mission...

The *means* are:

- To invite all committed persons in the parish to be missionaries;
- To create a school of evangelization to form them;
- And to create small ecclesial communities with these committed missionaries so that they will have an experience of community;
- The mission will be carried out during one week, three times a year: during the important liturgical seasons, in the summer and in weekly classes;
- The theme will be the kerygma, and it will be shared progressively in each one of the home visits by means of small catechesis, person to person.

The *objective* of each mission is to form small communities and to invite the participants to come to know Jesus, to live their faith in a small community and to love the Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church and catechist of the parish community.

The *reality* has been surprising:

1. The Gospel has been shared in all parts of the parish. Now we have 11 ecclesial communities and 62 mission-houses, with 130 permanent missionaries who work each week in one of the small communities. And the mission ... continues.

All this has been accomplished by means of a *process*. We have visited all of the houses in the parish 18 times, and in each visit we have shared a different message from the Gospel. The goal is to evangelize, person to person, sharing the kerygma by means of brief messages to each brother or sister who does not participate in the church.

The themes have been the following: 1) God loves you; 2) Jesus Christ is the Son of God; 3) Jesus is Lord; 4) Jesus has saved us; 5) We have sinned; 6) Jesus brought us forgiveness; 7) The Church, the family of the children of God; 8) The Church and the forgiveness of sins; 9) The Virgin Mary, mother of our people; 10) The Community; 11) Those who have faith, how do they live?, etc.

This constant effort has created an environment of permanent mission, of living communities, of new life. Later on, along with the rest of the diocese, we studied the four gospels. Actually we are reflecting on the Sunday gospels and on several themes central to formation.

2. *Attention to the poor* is the second reality. We have followed the principle of St. Vincent: first bread and then catechism.... Some of our confreres have asserted that the ministry of charity comes before that of the word. Based on our experience we have to say that we are in complete agreement. We have had the good fortune that the government has approved of the “Open Residence for the Elderly” and that along with this approval comes a quota of food supplies and the permission to carry out certain construction projects.

The memory of Fr. Hilario Chaurrondo, an old friend of Comandante Fidel’s, influenced the decision to allow the Open Residence for the Elderly to proceed and not to place obstacles in its path. We can also affirm that despite so many missions person to person, despite the number of small communities (one in each block), the parish is better known for its attention to the poor than for its evangelization. The poor are the ones who best spread the truth and the reality that they are living.

The Church of La Merced has been another important reality. Two years ago the C.M. left the Parish of El Espíritu Santo, located near the Church of La Merced. Nevertheless, in La Merced began the mission, which has created a climate of community for the faithful from the moment of the separation. Fruits of the mission are three small communities, the well-organized parish *Caritas*, and the catechesis of children, youth and adults.

La Merced has begun its new project with the *Friends of La Merced* and the reorganization of the Vincentian Family.

The C.M. has proposed that La Merced become a center of evangelization and a place for the poor. It maintains a dining room for 45 poor persons, with service that is approaching the style of the “Open Residence for the Elderly,” and it hopes to be a “place of evangelization.” The Virgin of La Merced is identified in the religions of African origin with *Obatalá*, using devotions that are not Christian. It is to her that they look and pray.... This is the great challenge of evangelization for the Church in Cuba: respond to the reality of *synchretism*.

How can we respond to this set of beliefs?

The C.M. has been thinking of a continuous mission, an ongoing primary evangelization:

- That in the Church of La Merced we attend not only to the tourists who come as tourists, but also to those involved in synchretism who are

searching for the truth, and that we seek to relate to them through a process of dialogue;

- That in our preaching we constantly repeat the fundamentals of Christianity, because those who come to La Merced are never the same people;

- That our charitable activity become well known so that all will be attracted by the Christian signs which we offer.

In these efforts, the Vincentian Family Associations are doing marvelous work.

The houses in the eastern part of Cuba. The community has three houses in the eastern part of the island: in *Santiago*, the Church of San Francisco (the second house of the province in order of foundation: 1884); in *San Luis*, a parish under the care of the C.M. since 1919, and in *Baracoa*, the most traditional parish and the best loved by our older confreres. This parish has been staffed by the C.M. since 1908 and the bishop has just divided it into four parishes.

These three houses are connected with associations of the Vincentian Family and in all three the apostolic activity is carried out according to the plan of the Provincial Assembly: the mission in the communities and attention to the poor. The AIC in these houses, along with the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, is carrying out the project "Return to the Sources." This title was chosen to reflect the intention of returning to the beginnings of the Confraternities of Charity. Since we do not have the possibility of building dining rooms or residences for the elderly, it occurred to the members of the AIC to care for the poor in their own houses. The volunteers of the AIC, while cooking for their own families, also cook for a poor person. At noontime the volunteers bring them their meal, straighten up the house, and attend to the poor in Vincentian style. As a small compensation, taking into account the difficulties we have here in obtaining food and gas for cooking, we give the volunteers the modest sum of one dollar a week for each elderly person.

The experience of caring for the poor is setting the tone for us. The poor are the first to be evangelized, then they tell others what they have seen and heard. They are opening up our parishes and houses to a new evangelization.

Looking to the future. The province came out of its first crisis when there were only five members and five houses. Nevertheless we still have to

come out of the second one: the lack of vocations. Our Superior General, when he visited the local communities on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the presence of the sisters in Cuba, told us that *the formation of our own members* must be our first priority. We have taken concrete action: for the formation program we obtained a house on the outskirts of the city, located in a barrio called El Cotorro. A confrere was placed in charge. There has been no lack of young men who knock at the door. We have offered many courses and made many efforts, but we are in the same crisis as always in our Cuba. We currently have three candidates; we have had five, and as many as eight.

Despite this, we have a longterm hope. The Vincentian Family is coming together. We hope that introducing the charism of St. Vincent in our ecclesial communities will produce the expected fruits for the Church, the Little Company, and the Daughters of Charity. Their contact with the poor will transmit the beauty of our vocation.

And I will close as I began: Cuba is a beautiful garden, where the buds open up into flowers, and the flowers give their fruits. We need missionaries, missionaries, missionaries...

(GILBERT WALKER, C.M., translator)

**Alternative Methods for the Formation of the Clergy:
The St. Vincent de Paul Major Seminary
(Cali – Colombia)**

*by Alfonso Mesa, C.M.
Province of Colombia*

What is striking about this experience of clerical formation by the CM? It is being done for professionals. How did it begin? Since some of these experiences failed, why continue? Can it respond to new challenges in today's world? Let us look at the origins and characteristics and later we can pass judgment.

1. Origin of the Experience

There are vocations which demand special attention. Archbishop Isaias Duarte Concino, Archbishop of Cali, was aware of this fact and he began to explore the viability of a seminary for this type of vocation.

So, he contacted the Vincentian house in Cali. "Could you, Fathers, receive a group of seminarians whose circumstances of life require a special formation?" It was a call of the local Church that was searching for a response to one of its biggest problems: a shortage of priests.

The province studied the proposal, analyzed the possibility of responding affirmatively and studied the requirements for personnel and the need to fix up the house. The proposal became a reality on 9 August 1998 with the entrance of five aspirants to the priesthood. Three had done studies in other seminaries and were accepted by the Archbishop for the Archdiocese and two came from the Archdiocesan pre-seminary experience. Three Vincentian formators were in charge of the new work.

This is the fourth year of experience in this new work. During that time 20 have enrolled and three have been ordained. At present we have ten seminarians (seven in theology and three in philosophy). Six have left the seminary and one is doing a pastoral experience.

2. Criteria for Formation

In his post-synodal exhortation, *Pastores dabo vobis*, Pope John Paul II, taking up the ecclesial tradition, presents criteria for a formation experience like ours, which is with vocations for the priesthood who come at a mature age. The

document calls this fact “a new and hopeful sign which frequently occurs in the present situation.”¹

2.1. For whom is this necessary? For some of those who, after a more or less long experience of life as a layperson with professional commitments, want to be priests. We underline here the lay aspect, understood as a commitment with the local Church, and professional, given the secular job they held.

2.2. “It is not always possible, and frequently inconvenient, to invite adults to follow the educational course at the major seminary.”² Consequently, the experience requires its own route. It is necessary to discover it in each instance.

2.3. “After a careful discernment about the authenticity of these vocations”:³ it is a crucial criterion to discern well why these vocations have arisen. An adequate vocation program is needed for this type of experience.

2.4. “To prepare some specific type of formational accompaniment, to insure, through opportune adjustments, the necessary spiritual and intellectual formation”:⁴ this is a broad criterion that opens up the search for necessary adaptations to new styles of accompaniment. The spiritual and intellectual emphasis stands out.

2.5. A criterion that guarantees “the full insertion of these vocations in the one presbyterate and their intimate and cordial communion with it.”⁵ For this it is necessary to promote “an adequate relationship with the other aspirants to the priesthood and periods of presence in the community of the major seminary.”⁶

Based on these criteria we have elaborated the plan for the seminary and its itinerary.

3. Profile of the Candidate

We have to conform to the criteria of the Church. The first step is to look at the human and vocational profile of the candidates:

3.1. An age between 25 and 35-years old because at that age there is a certain ability to assimilate formation.

¹*PDV*, 64b.

²*Ibid.*

³*Ibid.*

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*PDV*, 64c.

⁶*Ibid.*

3.2. The type of professional or university studies: the kind of degree the candidate has and the occupation at which he has been working. This gives us some guarantees about the personal situation of these candidates (maturity, abilities, etc.).

3.3. A certain Christian and pastoral experience. We know that, ordinarily, vocations originate in adolescence or during one's youth. Probably they could not respond to the call at that stage, but it is possible that a vocation continued to be present in the lives of these men and it brought them to be tied pastorally to the local Church, to life in the environment of parish organizations or prayer groups, where many vocations are preserved or decided.

3.4. One year of pre-seminary. Besides having the criteria of human maturity, freedom and the capacity to choose and make the breaks required for this road, it is necessary that the candidate enter the seminary, assume its rhythm of life, join its community and accept its rules.

This moment of decision is difficult. There is a lot to be left behind: complete independence, a determined style of life and work; there are also new values to assume, for example, a sense of community goods. We have opted for a pre-seminary process; that is, a sufficient contact with the candidates, for almost a year, in which formation is imparted and goals are proposed for vocation, Christian life and parish experience.

Psychological help plays an important role here; helping — excuse the redundancy — to assure the authenticity of the vocation and favoring group integration in the common life of the seminary.

4. Life in the Seminary

The seminary itinerary demands living in community. The present definition of “seminary” tends to accentuate the community dimension, inviting the candidate to follow the process of the disciples around Jesus, emphasizing the centrality of the Kingdom and insisting that the Holy Spirit is the primary formator.

This reality brings us to:

4.1. Maintaining and creating an environment of freedom and responsibility adequate for professionals. Their age and condition merit this, but it is a call to seriousness and transparency of life.

4.2. Growing in communication with the formators and peers. Service, responsibility in the house and constant dialogue are indispensable.

4.3. Orienting their lives around the ideal of Jesus Christ, which has to become a criterion for life, aided by prayer, liturgy and spiritual accompaniment.

4.4. Studying theology, which they do at the archdiocesan major seminary. This experience of formation helps guarantee intellectual seriousness and achieve the criterion of priestly integration.

4.5. Identity with the archdiocesan Church. This is constantly highlighted in the sense of belonging to the local Church. This aspect is fostered by, among other things, frequent visits by the Archbishop (R.I.P.) and his auxiliary bishops. This is one of the pillars of the whole formation program, given the need for ministerial communion with the Shepherd, which facilitates knowledge of the ecclesial reality.

Contact with the archdiocesan Church is also achieved by the experience of the apostolate in different parishes in the city and, in a special way, in a new, suburban parish in a poor area. This activity is directed by a confrere.

4.6. The seminarians can exercise their secular profession during the time of formation in the seminary. This is demanded by the type of vocation that comes to us, ordinarily, from poor areas. The seminarians have to support themselves economically and help their families. At the same time, this means a demanding effort in order to attend to two things: work and study, avoiding compromising one or the other. This experience is difficult, but many of them have managed to achieve this rhythm since they have had to study at night and work during the day.

In the pre-seminary, besides knowing the human and Christian maturity of the candidates, they can be observed in their jobs, family life and secular commitments. In the meetings with the seminarians, we talk constantly about the sense of work.

5. The First Year of Formation

The first year of formation with us merits a special section. Some seminarians are professionals in areas of study of a humanistic type and had contact with studies that our canons call philosophy and humanities. If some come by this route, they enter directly into the cycle of theology. But, for the others, whose degrees are in the area of mathematics or administration and who have had very little study of the humanities (practically the majority), it is necessary to help them come up to a level where they can study theology.

In this preparatory year, they study the mystery of Christ and are given a glance at the integrity of priestly formation.

When the seminarians come home, after a day of work, they take courses in systematic philosophy, the history of philosophy, introduction to biblical science, Old Testament, foundations of Christian life, current teachings of the church and the correspondence course in catechetics given by the archdiocese.

The time of this formation is an intensely demanding one, which prepares the way for big decisions, because, due to the class schedule, they will have to adapt from a secular job and decide about the vocational road.

Through the years of theology we accentuate vocational discernment, with the traditional calls of the Church to ministry and holy orders, so that at the end of the fourth year of theology, they receive the diaconate and live it as an experience of ministry looking toward priesthood and as a time of insertion into the presbyterate.

6. Lessons from the Experience

The experience of these four years has brought us to see that:

6.1. Formation is a demanding process, because of work and study for the priesthood. Special concessions are not made. The seminarians are required to organize their time and to fulfill commitments. Neither the seminary nor the professional work they do can suffer.

6.2. Formation is personal and personalized. It takes into account the process of each one of the seminarians and, therefore, communication and constant contact are required.

6.3. It is very important to live intensely the moments of community foreseen in the order of day. The schedule is flexible, but the times for prayer, Eucharist, meals, formation dialogues and rest are not changeable.

6.4. It is indispensable to maintain the pre-seminary as an opportunity to know the candidates and offer them spiritual formation. Despite the professional experience of the seminarians, it is necessary to be aware of their lack of human and Christian formation today. They are children of their time!

6.5. It is important for them to evangelize by their way of exercising their profession in the places that they work. Why are they allowed to work? For the money? So as not to be dependent on people who earn a salary? It is not just that. It should be a formative moment of Christian and priestly presence in these places. In fact, their workmates note the change in the seminarians when they enter the seminary. There are changes of attitude and behavior. They know more about reality and the world of the economy than traditional candidates, but they

lack the evangelizing dialogue with the world of culture and with society, in what the human and secular experience brings to priestly formation.

There is still some doubt about how they will act when they do not have to work professionally. How will they live their priestly ministry? In fact, after ordination, they will not be able to exercise their profession as they did during formation, since they should be free to develop their ministry according to the needs of the archdiocese. At present, to receive the diaconate, they have to leave their secular occupations.

6.6. And so, there arises one last critical reflection about the sense of this work: Is its reason for existence only because of the shortage of priests or to help a few achieve their goal? Is it positive that this space in the seminary has been opened for some vocations who, as we have been saying, are a sign of hope and of new times, but also negative, given the tendency of young people to postpone decisions and wait longer before leaving home? Is it only a new method of vocation ministry? Maybe we should look at these vocations from a more critical and evangelical position in a dialogue between faith and culture; vocations, which can still offer something and work in their own environment and, from within, exercise their ministry.

To evangelize the professional world. Someone invited me to reflect on this type of experience, but from outside, for example in a poor environment with criteria of insertion, where the candidates work and are formed alongside the poor. Would this not be more significant? Would that not open the experience of priestly formation to the questions that come from social reality (unemployment, violence and the poverty which the city lives on its edges)? How can the experience be made more evangelizing? This is the challenge which remains and which will give us a greater guarantee of success in vocation ministry.

The fundamental question is: where will the newness be, in the external, in a new environment for vocations, or in a mentality which knows how to enter the world (inculturation) and from there discerns the evangelical dynamism of a faith lived in the reality of the cities?

There is much more still to be thought about. This experience is only a little sign, when viewed from the perspective of the classical formation, but there has to be a continual reflection which will open up new roads.

(JOHN PRAGER, C.M., Translator)

A Daily and Impassioned Seeking

*By the Most Rev. Beniamino De Palma, C.M.
Archbishop of Nola (Italy)*

Let the bishop “*be like a father and a brother to the poor ... Let his diocese be a place where the Church really is the Church of the poor. Let him pray with the poor. Let him eat with the poor ... Let him be a father and a brother to the priests of his diocese ... Let him be able to listen to them.*”

In his intervention at the *Synod of Bishops* last October, Fr. Robert Maloney gave, in a few beautiful words, the profile of a pastor concerned for the needs of the least, a man of optimism and of dialogue, more attuned to persons than to structures, sensitive to such a degree that he intuitively knows when it is time to encourage, to support, to redirect, and to start anew.

Even though as bishops we have a different place in the organic structure of the Community, I believe that that my *belonging* to the Vincentian family goes to the heart of who I am. I love my Community of origin. In its womb the direction of my life took its form. Thus, I hope to share with each of my confreres a daily and impassioned seeking of the ways that express faithfully, and, at the same time, define better the Vincentian identity and ideal that I learned during my formation. These seeds bore in those places where the Community asked me to celebrate the gift of my consecration and my priesthood, through innumerable occasions of human and interior maturation, the encounter with the poor and their histories.

A look back on the journey already completed gives me that sense that it is not easy to decipher that will of God in the events of our lives, a task which our Founder “commanded” us insistently to take up with an open spirit and without hesitation. This has also happened in my life, especially in those decisive moments of “Exodus,” that sent me forth from old ideas and securities toward new and unknown adventures.

Thus it has been, right up to the last, unpredictable turn that he put in my life, calling me to the episcopal ministry. I know quite well that all this happened, not because of any merit of mine, but because of the *unfathomable plan of the One who arranges everything according to his own will*, and “has judged me worthy of his trust by calling me to ministry” (1 Tim 1:12). It is really true: God chooses the one who is foolish, weak and not well born (cf. 1 Cor 1:27-28).

My lived experience as a bishop in a diocese of Southern Italy, large in territory and with many complex problems, puts me continually in contact with situations in which I indicate, instill, and even seek with others some reasons for hope, for dreams, and for the courage to get back on the journey, which at times gets detoured and, sometimes, interrupted. There are so many human situations in which I recognize the need of the presence of a Church that is impassioned for the human person, even only if capable of “remaining with” (as did the *Samaritan* in the Gospel, and *Simon the Cyrenian* along the *Way of the Cross*) young people, families, men and women, the elderly, infants, workers, the disabled — all of whose compromised and broken lives are formidable provocations to my faith, challenges to my hope and my trust in the redemption of history, calls to my Christian and pastoral charity that I cannot ignore. These are the moments when the “naked” and demanding words of St. Vincent come back to me, as if to dissolve every presumption: “*a great trust in the help of God is the supreme means to do his work. He is the strength of the weak, and the eye of the blind.*”

I am not the “man of the temple” or the administrator of worship — I tell myself — but rather the companion on the street of every man, my brother, the witness to and the servant of that “infinitely creative charity” to be lived with the colors of simplicity, meekness, and pastoral longing. “Affective” and “effective” charity enabled St. Vincent to formulate in a unique essential the directions to guide one’s path: “*It is not enough for me to love God if my neighbor does not love him. I must love my neighbor as the image of God and the object of his love, and do all I can so that they, in turn, can love their Creator, who knows them, who considers them as brothers, and has saved them*” (SV XII, 263).

Thanks and praise, abandonment into the merciful and providential hands of God, are the first movement toward the sources of Vincentian spirituality, and these are the closest to my heart, the deepest and most radical of my connections to God, the ones that make me ask myself frequently about the validity of my choices and my projects in life.

I am convinced that all of this flows from a stubbornly “optimistic” vision of a reality that has been, after all, redeemed by the Cross and visited by God. I believe that giving witness to “Easter hope” is one of the most pressing things I must do — as a believer and a priest — from within our culture which is always more anchored in the present, which looks with great mistrust at a confused future, which responds with skepticism before every certainty proposed to it, which finds itself broken apart at its center by individualistic tendencies, even though the world moves toward globalization.

I think of the difficulties and the daily dramas of the many people I meet in my ministry. I think of how many young people, adults, women and men, I

see as interiorly torn between desires and necessities, between proposals to do good and the inability to change, between histories that would like to change and realities that turn the lights out on dreams.

In these moments I remember the drawing power and determination of what St. Vincent wrote: “we have to cast our nets courageously” (SV III, 282).

My years in episcopal ministry have been a “school of humanities,” an untiring lighthouse of surprises. In the give and take of events I continue to look for and to gather up with sincerity of heart all those occasions that in some way question me and involve me as a Vincentian.

Rethinking my experience to see what it means to be a “Vincentian bishop” means for me redefining some of its specific dimensions. In particular:

The Primacy of Evangelization

The pastoral sensitivity of our Founder made him think about the preaching of the word as *the continuation of the very mission of the Son of God*. Thus he taught us, and in pursuit of this goal he gave his whole life. For this purpose the Risen Lord has sent his Church throughout the world and for this purpose (of this St. Vincent was certain) the Holy Spirit gave life to the “Little Company.” To give the *Good News* today to a person means to let him know that life today, that our history makes sense — in other words, to make come alive in the person the dignity of being redeemed and a real desire for God. During the Synod, Cardinal Martini talked about a return to the Gospel as a decisive cultural response to the needs of Europe — experienced above all by young people — of rediscovering one’s identity and rediscovering the values that express who the human person is. As a bishop, I translate this into multiplying and sustaining the paths that lead to Christ, and lead us to “fix our gaze on him,” because it is listening to his Word that makes flow a continual, seductive call to be his follower.

The World of the Poor

Tenderness toward the least among us, as well as for those who bear the stigmata of both old and new injustices and in their hearts — this is what I believe to be the historical sense of *evangelizare pauperibus*, and represents, at least as an intention, one of the attitudes continually present in my program of episcopal service. This is the “fundamental option” to make operative in the terms that our own Superior General suggested to the bishops: “*Awaken the concern of its members, the wealthy especially, that they might work with you in the service of the poor. Bring together young and old, men and women, clergy and lay, rich and the poor themselves in the service of the most needy ... Plan*

with the poor, so that they might have a voice in their own future. Celebrate the Eucharist with them. Share the word of God with them. Communicate to them your own conviction that the Kingdom of God is here and that it is for them. And since women and children are almost always the poorest of the poor, stand at their side in their struggle for basic human rights.” Teaching solidarity is a sobering way of life, focused on what is essential: *“The people respect above all the poverty of the bishop who conforms his life to that of Jesus Christ, the Bishop of bishops”* (SV III, 94). These are the words of St. Vincent, and they carry that sense of experience and wisdom.

Priests, my Friends

“Since Our Lord must be our model in whatever condition we find ourselves, those who are to direct others must look at him and take their example from him. He governed them with love....” Life together and the brotherhood I share with priests, who with me bear the burden and the joy of pastoral commitment, are precious moments so that the diocesan presbyteral service be lived as a way of welcome, of reconciliation, and of feast, and not just as a building site of initiatives and projects, but as family for each priest. I am convinced that the unending search for harmony makes each one even more ready to return to his ministry with a more serene interior disposition, able to gather up the challenges of a changing society and culture, able to find meaning and certainty. The intuition of St. Vincent, who put *fraternal charity* as a necessary condition for *pastoral charity* is extraordinarily true for those of us called to be men of peace, of reconciliation and of communion, but who often find ourselves at the risk of being good teachers, but not always good witnesses.

With each of my priests I would like to share the commitment to ongoing formation, which I believe to be one of the most important components for the task at hand of “proclaiming the Gospel in a world which changes,” in and around the areas in which we live. In his time, St. Vincent showed that he, too, understood this need when he said: *“the priest must have the necessary instruction, otherwise he would risk offending God ... To be a priest without the knowledge necessary is to be a priest against the will of God....”* Certainly, a culture which is not directed toward itself, but rather helps sharpen sensitivity and discernment, which makes rich in humanity the life of the priest, grounds him with enthusiasm in his vocation and presents him before his people as a true icon of Jesus, the Good Shepherd: *“Learn also the science of the Lord and his maxims and put them in practice in such a way that what you learn ... may help you to serve God and his Church better”* (SV XII, 64).

Laity: the People I Love

Every day I find in lay people a multiform richness of charisms, willingness and goodness. Their experience of life makes them experts in the joys, the sorrows, the worries and the hopes that are hidden in the heart of society. Their sensitivity toward the themes of justice and peace, of human rights, is often able to catch me, us men of the temple and of dogmas, sometimes escaped from life itself ... At times I ask myself: in what initiatives did Vincent take part because of the intuitions and the generosity of simple people?

Esteem for laity thus gets translated into privileged attention to them. To grow together, as clerics and as lay people, toward an open and constructive dialogue, to encourage them in their sense of ministry and in their sense of mission, to value their contribution to the building up of the Kingdom, to make them actors and bearers of a culture of life rooted in the Gospels, all these are indispensable and ambitious objectives of the pastoral program of a Church that intends to live credibly in obedience to the Gospel it proclaims and in the concrete signs of charity, which becomes its history.

In the diocese in which I live, the presence of other Christian churches and confessions makes necessary a continuous dialogue, a humble seeking of a truth much larger than the fragments which each one has at his disposition. This ecumenical tension spreads and brings together not only relationships of respect and communion in religious and cultural diversity, but also feeds within the communities the need to find again the fundamentals of each one's faith.

Before scenes that open up, laden with expectations, but also with fears, I know that every day my walk begins again with the people God has given over to my care. The only title I can truly claim is that of being a son of St. Vincent. To him I leave the last word.

“O Savior of the world, I choose you as the only example of my life, and I offer you the holy and irrevocable promise to live according to the promises I made in my holy Baptism and in the reception of Holy Orders.”

(ROBERT STONE, C.M., translator)

**A Letter to Father Vincent De Paul in Heaven
about the 350th Anniversary of the Vincentians in Poland**

*by Jan Dukala, C.M.
Province of Poland*

Our Most Venerable and Beloved Father Vincent,

On the morning of Friday, 17 September 1660, a convoy of horse-drawn carriages with three Daughters of Charity and four Vincentians left the courtyard of Saint-Lazare for Rouen (113 kilometres away), where they boarded a ship and sailed for Poland. It took them weeks rather than days to reach their destination (it was then about 3200 kilometres). As you remember — though it is rather we on earth who need to be reminded of things — you had been bedridden for more than a month when they came into your room to take their leave. They wanted your blessing for the journey and the mission they were to accomplish in the far-off kingdom ruled by King Jan Casimir and Queen Louise-Marie Gonzaga, whom you knew from Paris. When the small party had left, you dictated a letter to Brother Ducourneau with an account of that event. It was addressed to Firmin Get, Superior of the Congregation of the Mission in Marseilles and brother of Nicolas Get, the man who had just received your blessing for his Polish mission. He and his companions arrived safely in Gdansk and then in Warsaw where they were welcomed by the superior of the Holy Cross house, Guillaume Desdames. He had left for Poland with your blessing nine years earlier. Meanwhile, on Monday 27 September shortly before 5 a.m., you, dear Father, moved out of your Parisian abode to your heavenly home. While Mademoiselle Gras (Louise de Marillac), Francis de Sales, Jane Frances de Chantal and your departed friends must have greeted you with joy, your sons and daughters on earth were filled with sadness and grief. Your funeral in Paris was worthy of a king, as people have said ever since, but the mourning did not last long because all of those who knew you — kings and courtiers, cardinals and bishops, Daughters of Charity, missionaries and the poor — were sure that your new home was filled with light, warmth and love.

Dear Father, you often asked your missionaries and, later, the Daughters of Charity to write to you from wherever they lived, far or near, about all kinds of things that were happening to them, great or small. You called on them to inform you about the state of their health, the difficulties in their apostolic work, and, of course, about their successes which you saw as one of God's gifts and the fruit of our humble cooperation with him. We know from you that regular exchange of information is vital for the ties which bind our Congregation and for the strengthening of our unity. In my letter from Poland I am going to tell you about

the celebrations which not only marked the 350th anniversary of the arrival of the Vincentians in Poland but also stressed the fact that, since 1651, they have lived and worked in this country, sharing its eventful, complicated and paradoxical history.

Let me start with the basic facts about the broad context of our anniversary. We are a small portion of the Church which is the spiritual home of 35 million Catholics (out of a population of nearly 38 million). Until 1989, when the Communist system imposed on Poland after the Second World War finally crumbled, we had 48 male religious orders and societies. Since then their number has grown to 73; they comprise about 13,000 priests and brothers and some 3,000 aspirants. We, your missionaries, are just one of those religious Congregations. In our province there are three bishops, 247 priests, 42 clerics and eight coadjutor brothers. We live in 25 houses in this country and two abroad (one in Austria, the other one in France). Sixty-three missionaries — priests and brothers — who were born in Poland and received their formation in our seminaries have gone to work abroad in Europe and overseas (in Africa, America and Asia).

I am mentioning this to you, Venerable Father, because some of the missionaries who are working abroad returned to Poland for the anniversary festivities like birds that return to their old nests. Also many laymen, and not just from our parishes, joined in the preparation and celebration of the great anniversary of our province. Among them were the mayors and councillors of the towns where we have our houses, and some members of parliament. Even the Prime Minister Jerzy Buzek (a Protestant) acknowledged the occasion. Unable to attend the celebrations at the Holy Cross Church in Warsaw, he sent an eloquent and thoughtful letter to the Pastor, Mieczysław Kozłowski. Journalists too contributed to our jubilee. In a number of articles in the daily and weekly press and on the radio they talked about you, dear Father Vincent, your activities in France and your missionaries in Poland. There were also some slots on television, including an interview with our Visitor Bronisław Sieńczak. I am not going to write more about it so as not to annoy you. You disapproved of publicity even in your day. The Congregation was not to seek it lest its noise should drown the humility of the men of the mission and mere words replace real work for the benefit of the poor. Nevertheless, if Francis de Sales, the patron saint of journalists — you are still very good friends, are you not? — asks you about them, tell him that in Poland they can still talk and write about the Good News, spiritual life and Christian charity in an interesting and respectful way and not just run after political scandal, violence and

sex; i.e., stories which, unfortunately, seem to appeal most to the mass audience.

The anniversary celebrations were divided into four phases.

The opening took place in Bydgoszcz (northwestern Poland) in a basilica dedicated to you, dear Father Vincent. The construction of the church began in 1925 as a vow of gratitude to mark the 300th anniversary of the Congregation of the Mission. The present jubilee was inaugurated there on 23-27 September 2000. In the choir that sang *Te Deum laudamus* and *Magnificat* was the voice of the Superior General Fr. Robert Maloney. He concelebrated the thanksgiving Mass with three bishops (two of them members of the Vincentian family), the Visitor Bronisław Sieńczak and 110 priests (Vincentians, diocesan clergy and guests from other religious orders). It is worth noting that about 35 members of the Congregation hail from that parish. In Bydgoszcz the Superior General gave two conferences, one for the Vincentian clergy and the other for representatives of various groups within the Vincentian Family. Twenty buses brought them to the meeting from all parts of Poland, a visible proof of its steady growth over the last ten years. The ceremonies were also attended by the Daughters of Charity, who have their provincial centre at Chełmno on the Vistula, 60 kilometres from Bydgoszcz. They celebrated the 150th anniversary of their province a few days later — a festive occasion attended likewise by their Superior General, who travelled to Poland in the company of Fr. Józef Kapuściak, Assistant General. The Bydgoszcz festivities were well prepared and lasted three full days. As general participation in religious ceremonies continues to be high in Poland, the occasion was used for an in-depth evangelization reflecting the Vincentian spirit (Bydgoszcz is a big city of some 350,000). It was Fr. Augustyn Konek, local superior and pastor, who as host and organizer, made the Bydgoszcz festivities a resounding success.

The Kraków phase of the jubilee proceeded in two movements. The first began on 8 September with the opening and official blessing of the *Joyful News 2000*, a large educational centre at Piekary near Kraków. It was followed by a two-day symposium with prayers, lectures and discussions on the history of the province, the nature of today's apostolic work and perspectives for the future. The sessions took place on 13 and 14 October in the Kraków Provincial House. The opening of the *Joyful News 2000* centre attracted once again the Superior General Robert Maloney (who came from Rome) and an army of guests, Vincentians and laymen from Poland and abroad. Among them was Cardinal Franciszek Macharski, a handful of top-ranking politicians and, last but not least, Mrs. Josephine Gebert, a Swiss benefactress of the Centre and, if you will allow me to

make this comparison, a present-day Mme. de Gondi. The celebrities at the *Joyful News 2000* were hosted by Bronisław Sieńczak, who, together with his collaborators and especially Fr. Czesław Patoń, is its initiator and *spiritus movens*. I am sure that the Visitor, Bronisław Sieńczak, has been telling you about it for years because he cannot help doing it on each and every occasion no matter who happens to be his listener. The action of helping children from materially or spiritually impoverished families has been going on for ten years now in a few smaller educational centres run by the Vincentians in Kraków (there are three of them), Tarnów, Żmigród and elsewhere. We feel that there is now more need of this type of work aimed at helping families and the young people themselves than at any other time and that it opens one of the doors for the future in our province. It is at any rate a highly visible manifestation of the special charism of our Congregation.

Now I would like to return to the second act of the Kraków Jubilee which took place on 12-13 October in our House at 4, Stradom Street. The house can be described best in the following words from the litany in your honour, *semper sibi constans*. At first, for 200 years, the Congregation of the Mission conducted here the formation of priests for the Kraków Diocese (alongside the Vincentian students). Since 1901 it has been the cradle of all Polish Vincentians and, for the last few decades, it has helped in the formation of students from five to eight other religious congregations. Apart from the liturgy, solemnized in our beautiful, though somewhat cramped, church, the jubilee was celebrated in the hall of the Institute of Theology. Two days were packed with lectures and discussions about the history of the Congregation in Poland and its present-day activities. The occasion was used to promote two volumes (the third and last volume is being prepared) of a commemorative book marking the 350 years of Vincentian presence in Poland. The audience also had the opportunity to see the premiere of a one-hour film about the life of the Vincentians called *Infinite Mission*. It is the fruit of a year's work of a team of professionals and a Vincentian. Among the guest participants at the session were some Daughters of Charity, missionaries from three other religious societies, and members of the Kraków laity who maintain friendly relations with our community. The event at Stradom was organized and hosted by the superior of the house and rector of the Institute of Theology, Fr. Kryspin Banko.

Dear Blessed Father Vincent! The third instalment of the 2001 Vincentian Jubilee, which took place between 9 and 15 September in the Holy Cross Church in Warsaw, had the most impressive programme, featuring a “polyphony” of voices. As you remember, it was there that the first Vincentians to arrive in Poland

settled down in November 1651. Led by their superior, Lambert aux Couteaux, they took two years to learn Polish and take all the parochial duties in their stride. Later they built a beautiful church, which would play an immense role in Warsaw's history (for 100 years it functioned as the substitute Warsaw cathedral). Indeed, the church and its religious work continue to enjoy a high reputation and respect in the Polish capital. As Prime Minister Buzek wrote in the letter to Cardinal Józef Glemp and the pastor, Mieczysław Kozłowski:

This church with its missionaries has had a firm place in the religious, cultural, social, scientific and political life of our country. It is here that Poles and visitors from all over the world pay their homage at the urns with the hearts of Frederick Chopin and Władysław Reymont (the Nobel Prize winner for literature in 1924).

The activities of the Vincentians in Poland, their invaluable contribution to various spheres of religious and national life (missions, pastoral work, diocesan seminaries, primary education, science, culture, charitable work for the ill and the poor) were the subject of homilies by the Apostolic Nuncio Archbishop Józef Kowalczyk, Cardinal Józef Glemp, Bishop Marian Duś, Archbishop Tadeusz Gocłowski CM and the Visitor, Bronisław Sieńczak, among others.

The celebrations in Warsaw attracted a large number of lay participants. Among them were, in addition to the parishioners of the Holy Cross Church, numerous journalists, who wrote articles about the Vincentians, talked about our missionaries on the radio, showed highlights of our festivities on television, and made two films for Polish television about the Congregation of the Mission and Holy Cross Parish.

Dear Father Vincent, I am about to finish. Excuse me for carrying on so long. I began my story by reminding you of the three groups of missionaries that came for your blessing to Saint-Lazare before leaving for Poland (in 1651, 1654 and 1660). We still need your blessing very badly. We begged for it during our anniversary celebrations and we have begged for it since. Having listened to the accounts of Vincentians who took part in our jubilee and who may in a way have a broader picture than ordinary observers, I am confident that the jubilee deepened our spiritual lives and refocused our charism and that its ripples were felt by many laymen, especially those who belong to the Vincentian Family. André Froissard of Paris, whose high regard for you is on record and needs no further proof, makes an intriguing disclosure on the last page of his wise and beautiful book on St Vincent de Paul:

Overawed and moved, spellbound by that face which knew something of heaven and tears, it was my turn to join the crowd of children and wretches whose lives were saved by Father Vincent de Paul. Today, too, there are amidst us missionaries, Daughters of Charity, as well as countless followers of that saintly man, who receive the mystery which, in Christ's name, reveals to them his heart. The mystery of the soul's growth is — compassion.

Thank you — let us all thank you — dear Father Vincent, for revealing to us the secret of the *unfolding of the soul*. It is possible, or even most probable, that the festive anniversary of the arrival of your missionaries to Poland let some of those that took part in it see the mystery of your heart.

SOME OPPORTUNITIES FOR CREATIVITY IN THE CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION TODAY

Jesus was very aware that works speak to us more powerfully than words, that witness moves us more forcefully than commands, and that *symbols* engage us more profoundly than sermons. In fact, in reflecting about creativity, this was the point that St. Vincent most admired about Jesus. It is the origin of a text that is one of the most popular sayings of St. Vincent today and which appears on the front page of our Vincentian Family web site. The context is quite different from what we normally think of when we use this text. St. Vincent was speaking to a dying brother, encouraging him to trust in God's mercy. After describing many of the signs of God's tender love, he told the brother that Jesus, foreseeing his death, did not want to leave his followers alone, fearing that in his absence their hearts would grow cold. And so, he tells the brother, "since love is creative even to infinity ... Jesus instituted this venerable sacrament which serves as food and drink for us ... Because love is eager to do everything it can, he so willed it."¹

THE CREATIVITY OF ST. VINCENT

I suspect that Vincent himself would deny that he was creative. Many historians tell us that he was not a particularly original thinker. But my own judgment is that St. Vincent was remarkably creative in this sense: he listened well; he knew a good idea when he heard one and he was inventive in putting good ideas into practice. He had the capacity to shape good ideas into concrete forms, many of which have lasted for hundreds of years. I offer you three rapid examples.

First, in 1617, in order to meet the desperate needs of the poor of his parish, he founded the Confraternities of Charity, what have often been called the Ladies of Charity. He wrote rules for them. He worked at their formation. They still exist today, 384 years later, as the International Association of Charities. They have 260,000 members in 45 different countries. In many places they are a wonderfully dynamic group that works in concrete, self-help projects among the poor.

Secondly, the Daughters of Charity were a revolutionary foundation. St. Vincent was able to do what Francis de Sales and others were unable to do. St. Vincent and St. Louise fashioned this new type of community slowly and subtly, studiously avoiding the canonical bonds that kept women enclosed in the cloister. Vincent told the sisters that they would have:

¹SV XI, 146.

- *for monastery only the houses of the sick and the place where the Superioress resides,*
- *for cell a rented room,*
- *for chapel the parish church,*
- *for cloister the streets of the city,*
- *for enclosure obedience, going only to the homes of the sick or places necessary for their service,*
- *for grill the fear of God,*
- *for veil holy modesty.²*

Vincent and Louise released into great cities and into small villages what would soon become an army of generous women who vowed to give their whole lives to God in the service of the sick poor. Millions came to imitate the Daughters of Charity as countless apostolic societies sprang up in the Church after the model of this new creation. The service of generous Daughters of Charity over more than 360 years has brought health to the sick, knowledge to the uninstructed, a home to the abandoned, food to the hungry, life to those walking in the shadow of death.

Third, Vincent was one of the greatest reformers of the clergy in the 17th century, a century noted for reformers of the clergy. He founded 20 seminaries in his lifetime. He took part in the Council of Conscience for a decade, advising the king on the selection of bishops. Most of the great spiritual leaders of the time flocked to the Tuesday Conferences which he organized. Abelly states that more than 12,000 ordinands made retreats at St. Lazare during Vincent's lifetime.

As you know, Henri de Maupas du Tour, the preacher at his funeral, was so struck by Vincent's creativity that he stated: "He just about transformed the face of the Church."

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CREATIVITY TODAY

Today I would like to suggest some creative possibilities for us as Vincentians. As I do so, I am very aware of my limitations, but I am certain that you yourselves, in dialogue with one another, will come up with much more creative, more concrete possibilities than I will. So, I offer these ideas trusting in your own understanding. I hope you will regard these as simply a few thoughts to prime the pump for discussion.

Let me begin by saying this: a person does not always know that he is making a creative beginning. In fact, Vincent was surely not aware that the seeds he was planting would one day be great trees. He began the Daughters of Charity – it is so easy to forget this – as parish sodalities in which poor country girls could do some of the hard, hands-on work that richer Ladies of Charity could not do. Vincent never

²SV X, 661.

envisioned that they would become the largest Community that the Church had ever seen and that hundreds of other Communities would be born throughout the world imitating the Daughters of Charity.

What I am trying to say is this. Creative beginnings are usually recognized only later when they have grown into full-scale creative works. The seed is beautiful only in the flowering tree. So I say to you today: sow many seeds. Let your ears be open, as were the ears of St. Vincent, to new ideas. Take them and use them yourself. Support new initiatives of others. In these challenging times, encourage creativity, and be courageous and persistent in putting creative ideas into practice.

1. *Service to our Vincentian Family.*

Here I offer you just a brief picture of our Vincentian Family at present. Then let me suggest to you some opportunities for creativity as members of that Family.

NAME	DATE OF FOUNDATION	NUMBER OF MEMBERS
International Association of Charities	1617	260,000
Congregation of the Mission	1625	4,000
Daughters of Charity	1633	23,000
Society of St. Vincent de Paul	1833	530,000
Vincentian Youth Groups	1847	62,000
MISEVI	1999	30
Association of the Miraculous Medal	1909	1 million registered

Will the third millennium see the blossoming of the role of lay men and women in the Church? Whenever we find ourselves wavering about the importance of the laity in the Church's missionary activity, we should reexamine the Pauline letters and the Book of the Acts. These will rapidly dispel any doubts. Paul says that all the Gentile communities are indebted to Priscilla and Aquila, a married couple.³ It would be hard to find higher praise than that.

These two great missionaries appear on four occasions in the New Testament. What do we know about them? We know that they were:

- lay missionaries
- a married couple
- Jewish Christians (converts)

³Rom 16:4.

- expelled from Rome during the persecution of Claudius
- living in exile in Corinth
- working as tent makers (the same occupation that Paul had)
- hospitable to Paul, taking him into their home
- his companion missionaries in Ephesus and really the founders of the Church there⁴
- risking their lives for his sake
- hosts of the local Church in their own home (a house-church)
- catechizers of the great missionary Apollos.

Paul and Luke regarded this couple as outstanding missionaries. They appear in the letter to the Romans, the first letter to the Corinthians, in the 18th chapter of Acts and at the end of the second letter to Timothy. Priscilla, whom Paul calls Prisca, is twice mentioned ahead of her husband; this seems to be an indication that she had a more important role to play in the missionary activity of the primitive Church than did her husband.

What are such lay ministers asking of us. I suggest three things.

First, formation. They hunger for it. They are constantly asking for it. No other request is addressed to me as Superior General more frequently than the request for formation.

Secondly, prayer. They want to learn to pray and they want to pray with us. In the wonderful document *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, published just over a year ago, Pope John Paul II states this: “Our Christian communities must become genuine ‘schools’ of prayer, where the meeting with Christ is expressed not just in imploring help but also in thanksgiving, praise, adoration, contemplation, listening and ardent devotion, until the heart truly ‘falls in love.’ Intense prayer, yes, but it does not distract us from our commitment to history: by opening our heart to the love of God it also opens it to the love of our brothers and sisters, and makes us capable of shaping history according to God’s plan.”⁵

Thirdly, practical service. Encourage lay people to be inventive in discovering the deepest needs of those they serve. Pose the question often: What is this poor person asking concretely? What is the deepest need of the person who is crying out to me? What are the children in the school or in the orphanage where I visit or work calling out for? What is the sick person in his or her home really seeking? What is the AIDS patient’s acutest pain? Then help them be creative in ministering to those needs.

⁴Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, *Paul, A Critical Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 171.

⁵*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 33.

2. *Form youth groups.*

Is there any sector of society that Pope John Paul II has focused on more clearly than youth? Sixty-four percent of the world's population is under 25. Young people are the third millennium. It belongs to them. If the Church is to be fully alive in the third millennium, it will be because it is energized by young people who believe deeply. The young will be the evangelizers and the servants of the poor in the third millennium. Most of us will hardly be there. If statistics hold true, I will not survive the second decade of the third millennium. But today's young people will be alive and energy-filled long after that. And so I suggest to you today that there is no apostolic goal more important for the Church and for the Vincentian Family than to reach out to and to offer young people a vibrant, Christian, Vincentian formation. We who live in the Vincentian Family have a wonderful gift to offer the young. Transmit it to them joyfully and generously.

Walt Whitman, a great poet from my own country, wrote this:

*Youth, large, lusty, loving — youth full of grace, force, fascination....
Day full-blown and splendid — day of the immense sun, action, ambition,
laughter....*

What can we offer young people? The same three things: formation, prayer, practical service.

Today in many countries there is a strong emphasis on engaging young people in service. Our missions, many of our parishes, and the schools of the Daughters of Charity work wonderfully at challenging the young to channel their energies toward the service of the poor. Groups like MISEVI and the Vincentian Volunteers do this for longer periods of time. I encourage you to work intensely at the formation of these same young people. I encourage you too to teach them to pray. I encourage you to create opportunities for them to serve in our foreign missions.

Interestingly, whenever St. Vincent formed a group, he wrote a Rule for it. We are all familiar with the Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission and also the Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity, but if you take the 13th volume of Pierre Coste's works of St. Vincent, you will find that we still have 19 other rules that he wrote. Surely there were many more. These are all for lay people.

So I pose to you the question today: what should "Vincentian Youth" look like in your country? If you had to write a rule for Vincentian youth today, what would you write? What should their life be like? What should their formation be like? What should their prayer be like? What should their works be like?

Form youth groups. Say to them, in the words of the message of the recent synod:

You, young people, you are “sentinels of the morning.” ... How is the Lord of history asking you to build a civilization of love? You have a keen sense of what honesty and sincerity require. You do not want to be caught up into divisive ethnic struggles nor poisoned by the gangrene of corruption. How can we be disciples of Jesus together and put into practice Christ’s teaching on the Mount of the Beatitudes?

3. *Champion the pastoral use of technology on behalf of the poor.*

Third world countries lament, often rightly, that progress in technology has meant further riches for the rich and an ever-increasing gap between the rich and the poor.

The Congregation of the Mission, and the Vincentian Family as a whole, has responded remarkably rapidly to the call to get online. All of our provinces can be reached by e-mail. Many of our works and institutions have expertise and well-developed web sites. These resources present us with a number of challenges.

1. First, can we use our Vincentian technological resources to draw others to work with us in serving the poor and investigating the causes of poverty?
2. Can we continue to train confreres in computer technology?
3. Can we seek grants for setting up computer learning centers in the poorest countries of the world? Would some of the large foundations, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ford Foundation, be willing to fund such educational projects? I visited such a computer center in Madagascar, which many regard as the poorest country in the world. The students there were already very good in computer technology.
4. We often think of computers as the tool of the young, but I have seen many older, retired confreres who have learned to use computers very well. Can we devise ways in which older confreres can help in the service of the poor through computer technology?
5. Can we design web sites that are really attractive to the young? Are young people, who spend so many hours online, attracted by our Vincentian sites? Can we be ministers to the young online? Could we win a prize for the site that is most attractive to young people?

With computers, age and health and distance are re-dimensioned. A sick man’s room can become his pulpit. A computer becomes his microphone for preaching the good news to others.

There is a bubbling cauldron of new technology in the world. English is fast becoming the world's technological language. Internet is making this happen. Can we use this powerful instrument in the service of the poor?

4. *Create a vocation culture.*

Most of us in this room grew up a vocation culture, though it went unanalyzed for the most part, as do most cultural phenomena. Can we contribute to recreating a vocation culture in your country?

What are the elements in a vocation culture? In other words, if a young person is growing up in a vocation culture, what is it that supports his choice to become a Vincentian? I suggest six elements:

1. A positive image of our men, our life together, our prayer, and our ministries in the Congregation of the Mission. This element lies very much in our hands.
2. A positive image of priesthood and brotherhood. This element does not lie completely in our hands, but we can influence it.
3. Support for vocations within a community of faith. Of course, a young person's family is especially important in this regard. But support can also come in schools, or it can come from youth groups in a parish. We can help create such communities. We can also try to involve parents in vocation ministry.
4. Personal contact with role models and some concrete way of experiencing their life, prayer, and ministry. This lies within our control, especially if we have houses where young people can at times be with the confreres, pray with them, and share their works.
5. Invitations, both implicit and explicit, "to come and see," as John's gospel puts it.⁶ Such invitations can be accompanied gradually by personal and vocational counseling.
6. Prayer for vocations. Jesus says it explicitly: "Pray the Lord of the harvest that he send workers into the harvest."⁷ This too lies within our control. We can pray ourselves and we can invite parents and young people to pray for vocations to the priesthood and brotherhood.

5. *Creating a gospel-centered environment.*

⁶Jn 1:39.

⁷Mt 9:38; Lk 10:2.

St. Vincent was incredibly active. The Church holds him up as a model for those engaged in concrete, practical work among the poor. But it is striking that his contemporaries regarded him as a contemplative. His spirituality was deeply evangelical. He focused on the person of Jesus as revealed in the scriptures and cited his words again and again. “Learn from me that I am gentle and humble of heart.”⁸ “Be wise as serpents but simple as doves.”⁹ “If anyone wants to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.”¹⁰

I suggest to you today that there is no more important service that we can offer to the Vincentian Family than the creation of a gospel-centered environment. I say this to each of you as individuals and I say it to the Congregation as a whole. Our works are very important, but our lives are even more important. What we do for the poor will have an enormous impact on the future, but what we are for the poor, the spirit we communicate to them, what we witness to them is even more crucial, drawing them to have hope in the future, to sense that they are being liberated from the bonds that hold them back, to find peace in their own hearts and to share peace with others.

And so the challenge is this: can we build local communities where evangelical charity reigns among us and then radiates out to the poor; where truth is spoken among us with simplicity, humility, and constancy and is spoken with those outside in the same way; where we engage in prayer peacefully, faithfully, and communally and then share our prayer naturally with others too; where we support one another and enjoy one another as friends and then share that friendship with the poor who surround us; where we listen well to each other and discern the will of God together and are also able to listen well to the poor and discern the will of God with them; where we encourage one another to renounce immediate gratification for the sake of more important goals and are able to manifest to those around us by our lives what really are life’s most important goals; where we are creative in expressing forms of love that are more lasting than sexual union and so witness to others that there are other very important vocations besides marriage?

I encourage you today, my brothers, to be creative in living the gospel yourself and in forming gospel communities. There is no greater gift that you can give to the Church and to our Vincentian Family.

Those are just five possibilities. Of course, there are many others.

John Rybolt recently reminded me of other traditional works that come from

⁸Mt 11:29.

⁹Mt 10:16.

¹⁰Mt 16:24, Mk 8:34, Lk 9:23.

the time of St. Vincent, like prison ministry and retreats. Can we find creative ways of ministering to prisoners or of helping work toward reform of the penal system? Confreres in some countries have already made creative contributions in this regard.

Can we create a specifically Vincentian form of retreat, something briefer that rivals the spiritual exercises in the Ignatian tradition?

No other era in history has known more migrants than our own. Can we be creative in ministering to waves of migrants that continue to roll across the borders of so many of our countries?

As you know, the worldwide Vincentian Family has launched a communal effort entitled, “The Globalization of Charity: The Fight Against Hunger,” beginning on September 27, 2001, and ending on September 27, 2003. Can we spread this campaign to lay people in all the institutions where we serve?

To do all of these things, of course, we need not just creativity. We need to be mobile. We need to support one another in community. We need to join one another in daily prayer that we might be nourished by the life of the Lord. We need to network with other branches of the Vincentian Family. Mobility, community support, prayer, networking – these are the conditions for creative ministry within the Congregation of the Mission.

More than two decades ago, long before most of us began to speak about the third millennium, a prophetic voice uttered these words as he envisioned the 21st century:

It helps now and then, to step back and take the long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God’s work. Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us. No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection, no pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the church’s mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

That is what we are about: We plant seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capability.

Those are the words of Oscar Romero spoken shortly before he was martyred in San Salvador in 1980.

My brothers, I say to you in closing: Go! I love the final words of Mark’s

gospel. Jesus, taking leave of the apostles, turns to them and says: “Go. Go into the whole world and proclaim the good news to every creature.”¹¹ The key to being a missionary is mobility. Go, and be a presence of the Lord in the lives of the most abandoned. Go, and assist them in their deepest spiritual and human needs. Go wherever the Lord asks. Go, go, go, and be a sign of the Lord’s peace and of his self-giving love.

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April 9, 2002

¹¹Mk 16:15.