

Unifying Elements in the Vincentian Family

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A. Of what family are we speaking?

When we speak about the Vincentian Family, we are alluding to all the Associations or Congregations whose lifestyle and apostolate are inspired by the many nuances of what is today called the “Vincentian Charism.”

Moreover, we know that charisms are gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to the Church through the intermediary of a person or group of persons for the service of the Church herself and for the world.

St. Paul speaks to us several times about charisms as gifts of God for the service of others. In his letter to the Corinthians he says: *“There are different gifts but the same Spirit; there are different ministries but the same Lord; there are different works but the same God who accomplishes all of them in everyone.”*¹

In my presentation I will speak about certain elements that foster unity among the different Vincentian Associations and their members. The unity that I am speaking about to you today desires to see Jesus’ dream, “that they all may be one...” become a reality. We also want to learn more and more about the common elements that enable us to unite our strength for a more efficacious commitment to be instruments of salvation for the poor. I am not going to say anything new; much has been written on this topic. Rather, my intention at this time is to remind you of what we are and what we accomplish as a Family.

In our Vincentian Family, as in all human families, there are certain members that see each other more frequently and build stronger relationships. In a family there are relatives that see each other occasionally at celebrations, while others have stronger bonds, such as brothers and sisters. In our Vincentian Family there are some Associations that are closer to each other, who see each other often, know each other as a close relative, like brothers and sisters. That is why the love between them is more visible: they deeply share life’s journey, difficulties, etc. They mutually collaborate and help each other to be formed so as to serve better.

First, I am speaking to you about these brothers and sisters in the Vincentian Family and I do so with the intention of reminding you of the end for which they were founded, **for the service of the poor:**

¹ 1 Cor 12:4-6.

The Confraternities of Charity, today the AIC: St. Vincent founded the Association of Charity in 1617 in Châtillon. The story of this foundation is very well known. Since its origins its purpose is clearly seen: *“To honor Our Lord Jesus Christ, and his holy Mother and to assist the sick poor ... corporally and spiritually.”*²

The CM or the Vincentian Missionaries: St. Vincent founded the CM in 1625. He founded it *to evangelize the poor through words and works, especially the poor people of the countryside through missions to the people and formation of the clergy. Its motto is “He has sent me to evangelize the poor.”*³

The Company of the Daughters of Charity: St. Vincent and St. Louise founded the Company of the Daughters of Charity in 1633 to *“be servants of the poor and that is to be servants of Jesus Christ” and to serve the poor corporally and spiritually.* Their motto is: *“The charity of Jesus Christ impels us.”*⁴

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul: In 1833 in Paris, Frederick Ozanam, along with other University friends, founded the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Its purpose was *“following the Vincentian tradition, to help our neighbor, those who suffer and the abandoned, just as Jesus Christ would do.”*⁵

Vincentian Marian Youth⁶: This came about in 1847 under the influence of the apparitions of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal to St. Catherine Labouré. Its purpose: *“To form members to live a solid faith following Jesus Christ the evangelizer of the poor. To live and pray like Mary, with simplicity and humility, taking on the spirituality of the Magnificat. To arouse, animate and sustain the missionary spirit of the association, especially through missionary experiences to those who are poorest and to youth.”*⁷

The Miraculous Medal Association: This association also came into existence within the Vincentian Family from the apparitions of the Blessed Virgin to St. Catherine Labouré⁸. Honoring Mary in the mystery of the Immaculate Conception as the model of the Christian life, *“its goal is to venerate Mary conceived without sin, the sanctification of its members, holistic formation in the Christian life and the apostolate of charity, especially to the most*

² SV XIII, 821.

³ Cf., Lk 4:16-20.

⁴ Cf., 1 Cor 5,14.

⁵ Cf., Mt 25:31-48.

⁶ This Association was approved by Pope Pius IX through the rescripts of 20 June 1847 and 19 July 1850, and confirmed by other dispositions of the Holy See. The text of the present Statutes were approved and confirmed by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (Prot. n. P. 53-1/99) on 2 February 1999. Cf., *Vincentiana* 43 (1999) 89-97.

⁷ International Statutes, 1999, Art. 9.

⁸ Its Statutes were approved by His Holiness Pius X on 8 July 1909. Cf., *Vincentiana* 42 (1998) 79-82.

abandoned (families and the poor in general). Through its symbol and power, Mary's holy medal offers a model and an aid to attain these goals."⁹

Lay Vincentian Missionaries¹⁰: This association came about from the heart of the Vincentian Family in 1999. Its goal: *"To foster, facilitate, sustain and coordinate the missionary presence and work of the laity in the missions 'ad gentes' confided to or animated by the Vincentian Family."*¹¹

According to what we have said about each of the aforementioned groups of the Vincentian Family, we can identify some common elements among them. I offer the following.

- Recognize St. Vincent as founder or inspiration;
- Have one common mission, which is the evangelizing service of the poor. This is the work of Vincentians;
- Have in common a lifestyle and a concrete form of service of the poor. We will see this idea more clearly developed in the following point;
- Share a common incarnational spirituality: God incarnate in the poor, that is to say that I speak to God when I speak with the poor; that I experience God in an encounter with the poor; that I serve and love God in the service of the poor;
- Share a secular character. The charism comes from an association with the laity; the Confraternity of Charity was the first Vincentian foundation. It is also secular because its members sanctify themselves by living out their mission in the world.

We can describe (not define) the Vincentian Charism as a style of Christian life in the Church and in the world. It is a way of being. It is not something that one adds to the person. It is not a garment that one puts on or takes off according to circumstances, opportunities or determined times. It is rather to live as Jesus, 24 hours a day. The charism is a gift that **fashions and marks** a lifestyle, relationships and actions of the person who receives it. That is why the charism is a strength that gives us the possibility to live our vocation as baptized in the world in a distinctive manner. The Vincentian Charism is a vocation in the Church and for service; it is a way of being and of carrying out our mission in the world.

Allow me to step ahead in our reflection by giving a response to a question that I would very much like to ask: What are the elements or the realities that unite us as family?

⁹ International Statutes, Art. 2.

¹⁰ Decree of Approbation (Prot. n. P. 53 -2/99) of the Holy See, 7 April 1999, in *Vincentiana* 43 (1999) 150-159.

¹¹ International Statutes, Art. 2.2.1.

B. Common style in the Vincentian Family

A family has common origins, therefore a common appearance, its own style of principles and expressions. It also has a written or oral tradition that passes from one to the other through the fabric of everyday life. What are the principles, gestures or common elements shared by the Vincentian family? I note some characteristics that manifest this lifestyle and the mission that this family, our family shares. These elements are found united in a single experience, so much so that even if we separate them in order to better reflect on them in daily life, they are intertwined.

1. The centrality of Jesus Christ, Evangelizer of the Poor

There is nothing more important in the spiritual experience of the Vincentian than the centrality of the experience of Jesus Christ, evangelizer and servant of the poor. This is the foundation of the Vincentian mission, the model for the Christian who wants to live faith as a commitment after the example of St. Vincent. From there, one discovers and follows Jesus, eyes fixed on him who lived close to the poor, listened to them, helped and pardoned them, gave them to eat, journeyed with them and proclaimed that the Kingdom of God was for them and all those who became like them.

This path fills one with passion, for it consists of entering into Jesus Christ, participating in his life, thoughts, feelings, love and destiny. That is why St. Vincent would say: “Our Lord Jesus Christ is, however, the true model and the great invisible picture on whom we should model all of our actions.”¹² Another time he said: “Remember, Monsieur, we live in Jesus Christ through the death of Jesus Christ, and we must die in Jesus Christ through the life of Jesus Christ, and our life must be hidden in Jesus Christ and filled with Jesus Christ, and in order to die as Jesus Christ, we must live as Jesus Christ.”¹³

Who is Jesus for me? With what gospel image of Jesus do I best identify my faith experience?

2. To love Christ in the poor and the poor in Christ, serving them “corporally and spiritually”

Jesus Christ in the poor and the poor in Jesus Christ are the two supports of the Vincentian heart in its journey through this world. We can distinguish Jesus Christ and the poor; we cannot separate them. A passion for Jesus Christ commits us to an effective compassion toward the poor and opens us to the

¹² Coste, Conferences to the CMs, N° 128, p. 208.

¹³ Coste 1, p. 276

suffering that is the price to pay in order to help the wounded along the way.¹⁴ We know well that salvation comes to us through Jesus Christ, not through the poor. The guarantee, however, that we accept this salvation consists in sharing it with the poor.

For Vincentians, the “rough and crude” poor are the suffering sacrament of the Lord. “But turn the medal and you will see by the light of faith that the Son of God, whose will it was to be poor, is represented to us in these poor people; he barely had the face of a man in his passion.¹⁵ He put himself in the place of the poor, even to say that what we do for the poor, he considers done to his divine person.”¹⁶ That is why the poor, their dwellings, the streets and hospitals are “holy Vincentian places.”¹⁷ For that reason, says St. Vincent, “When you leave prayer and Holy Mass to serve the poor, you are losing nothing, because serving the poor is going to God and you should see God in them.”¹⁸ Service, for the Vincentian, is corporal and spiritual. Today we say “holistic.” St. Vincent said that we must bring “bread and catechesis” to the poor.

3. Serve the poor with practical and concrete charity

Vincentian tradition stresses practical charity. That is the secret to holiness for the Vincentian. St. Vincent highlights effective love. “When I was hungry, you gave me to eat, not only had pity on me, but gave me to eat. And when I was thirsty, not only did you come close and look at me, but you gave me to drink. When I was in prison, you were not content to pray for me, but you came to visit me....”¹⁹

From the time of St. Vincent until our time in history today, the members of Vincentian Associations are known as men and women capable of loving in a practical, concrete and effective manner. They love by serving, by getting their hands dirty in the service of the poor. Vincentians were not born to be executives or administrators; they were not born to serve from plans and programs that are well intentioned but do not touch the misery of the poor. On the contrary, they were born to seek solutions to the problems of the poor, concrete short-term and long-term solutions.

4. They strive to live and serve in a simple and humble way

St. Vincent says: The spirit of Jesus Christ is a spirit of simplicity that consists of speaking the truth, telling things as they are without concealing or

¹⁴ Cf., Lk. 10:25-37.

¹⁵ Coste, Conference to the CM's, N° 16, p. 42.

¹⁶ To the Ladies of Charity, 11 July 1657.

¹⁷ Cf., Coste X, 958.

¹⁸ Coste, 31 July 1634, p. 4.

¹⁹ Cf., Mt. 25:31ff.

hiding (Coste Vol. 1, p. 242; Vol. 4, p. 483), concerned with God alone. St. Vincent is convinced of the importance of simplicity and says of it: "... is the virtue I love the most and to which I pay the most attention in my action²⁰. God likes to communicate with simple souls.²¹ The Vincentian is a person who strives to live this lifestyle as it is the path that makes us like God and places us in a close, approachable relationship with the poor.

The simple lifestyle enables us to establish "easy" relationships among ourselves, to quickly get to know each other, to be close to the poor, to be genuine, constant and faithful to our commitments. Simplicity commits us to the truth and to reject all that is falsehood and duplicity.

"Humility is the foundation of all evangelical perfection and core of all perfection.²² St. Vincent centers his attention on the humility of Jesus Christ, who took on our human condition out of love, and presents him as a model of humility par excellence.²³ Humility leads us to recognize our condition as creatures and our need for redemption. Humility is manifested by an attitude of gratitude for gifts received, and moreover, leads us, to see everything in our life as grace. It is also expressed by spiritual maturity that leads the person to live "in an attitude of servant" with the will to commit oneself even in the servile actions of service of the poor. Finally, humility is manifested by the effective desire to allow oneself to be evangelized by the poor, "our lords and masters." Without humility collaboration would be impossible.

What does it mean today to lead a simple and humble lifestyle so that the poor are able to recognize us as their servants without feeling offended or attacked?

5. They serve the poor by personal contact

Within the Vincentian Charism one serves the poor through direct personal contact. We are Vincentians because we are with the poor, we know them personally; programs for assistance are not abstract, but are developed after recognizing the wounds of the poor. That is our style; we have no other. For us, nothing can replace direct contact with the poor. They teach us what we must do. Their material degradation dictates to us the plan of work that we must follow. In order for this planning to be Vincentian, it must contain two inseparable elements: love that becomes concrete assistance in solidarity and conscious, liberating evangelization. Bread and catechism; charity and mission. The gospel without bread, without true assistance will remain sterile and bread without the

²⁰ Coste, I, 265.

²¹ SV XII, 168.

²² Common Rules for CM, II, 7

²³ Cf., Phil 2:7; SV XI, 394.

gospel will create dependent persons, that is, new poor. St. Vincent said: *“You should take great care that, as far as you can, they shall want for nothing both in regard to the health of their bodies and the salvation of their souls.”*²⁴

6. The poor are considered as our “lords and masters”

It is through experience of direct contact with the poor, through faith, that we learn this principle. They are the suffering sacrament of Jesus Christ, a rough, crude, sometimes seemingly bad sacrament. They are Christ disfigured on the cross, but Lord of the world, of history and of the heart of each one who follows him.

They command and we obey. They tell us how, when and what they need and we respond to their call. They are our masters and we must have a servant’s obliging, obedient and submissive love. We do not help them from on high, but from below, not from the exterior, but from the interior. We do not seek their gratitude but their healing and their liberation so that they will be in a position to help others.

They are our “masters.”²⁵ We learn true faith in God from them when we share it with them. St. Vincent said: “The net result of my experience on the matter is the judgment I have ever formed, that true religion — true religion, Gentlemen, true religion is to be found among the poor. God enriches them with a lively faith; they believe, they touch, they taste the words of life....”²⁶ They free us from our idols, our false representations of God. They teach us the action that God wants of us; we learn from them that we are guilty of their sufferings if we do not do all that we can to help them.²⁷ They themselves are the masters that heal us from an unbalanced faith that proclaims what it does not practice. From them we learn that the gates of heaven are made with the wood of the crucifixion and that we can help them carry and lighten the cross. In healing their wounds, we also heal ours. For this we must love with the sweat of our brows and the strength of our arms.²⁸ A service of accompanying lay Vincentians without a personal and direct service of the poor can be limited and impoverished.

7. Their love is affective, effective, inventive and communicative

Love that is compassion, affection and deep sentiment in our Vincentian journey becomes effective, a service carried out with joy, enthusiasm and steadfastness. This love is inventive to infinity; it sees and finds resources, organizes and invents forms of charity and the gift of life. It is a love that seeks

²⁴ Coste, Conferences to the DCs, p. 107.

²⁵ SV XII, 180.

²⁶ Coste, Conferences to the CM’s, N° 201, p. 505.

²⁷ Coste, Conferences to the CM’s, N° 125, p. 199.

²⁸ Cf., Coste, Conferences to the CM’s, N° 22, p.49.

to love and to make others love in the same way. St. Vincent said: *“It is not enough to love God if my neighbor does not love him,”*²⁹ and therefore, *“the Son of God made himself human like us, that we might not be only saved, but saviors like him.”*³⁰ St. Vincent communicated this love that he discovered and lived out: to all kinds of people from all conditions, men, women, ladies of the Confraternities of Charity, ladies of the nobility and simple village girls, simple brothers, missionaries, laity from all areas, the Duchess of Aiguillon and the shoemaker, Claude Leglay.³¹ If we love the poor, if we see them in Jesus Christ, we would want all people to be enthusiastic for this work of God. We would look for means to introduce them to this holy and urgent work. Now, as at the time of St. Vincent, we can say that the poor, who do not know where to go or what to do, the ones whose suffering gets worse every day, are my burden and my sorrow. That is why, without a doubt, we can affirm in truth: today the Vincentian charism is current and urgent in a world where the poor are multiplying more and more.

8. They allow themselves to be evangelized by the poor

The poor come and deliver us from a life too centered on ourselves. This is our best salary. They heal our wounds produced by our middle-class outlook, our nearsightedness. They give a sense of meaning and direction to our lives. They put us on the narrow path that leads to life. St. Vincent said: *“You should also reflect that your chief business, the one which God especially requires of you, is diligence in serving the poor, who are our lords. Oh, yes, Sisters, they are our masters.”*³²

To distance oneself from the poor is to distance oneself from God. To draw near to the poor is to draw near to God. They need the Good News and the Vincentian Family has received this Good News from Jesus Christ, with the bread of justice and the service of love. To evangelize according to the Vincentian tradition means continuing to make known the life of Jesus Christ, using the means of Jesus Christ and beginning with the preferred ones of Jesus Christ, then to all the others, but starting with the poor and their wounds. This is the Vincentian way of living love. To serve the poor is to serve Jesus Christ and to serve Jesus Christ is to serve the poor. The living and resurrected Christ sends us to heal the nail marks and side wound of Christ crucified whose passion is continued in the history of all the crucified and poor in this world.

Many aspects of the spiritual life of St. Vincent have been transformed, even in a significant way, from the encounter with the laity that God has placed along

²⁹ Coste, Conferences to the CMs, N° 209, p. 583.

³⁰ Coste, Conferences to the CMs, N° 196, p. 631.

³¹ Cf., Coste, Conferences to the CMs, N° 210, p. 669.

³² Coste, Conferences to the DCs, p.107.

the way. Those who today accompany Vincentian Associations must “allow themselves to be fashioned” by God, thanks to the attentive listening to the laity they serve and through whom God also reveals his will.

9. The Vincentian charism is a missionary charism

Being missionary signifies going out to meet others. Jesus is the missionary of the Father. St. Vincent is the missionary who abandoned his plans and projects in order to “be” for others. He invited men and women to move out of themselves and go to the poor in all of France and the entire world. He invited them to go where the needs were the greatest and where the poor were “the poorest.” Availability and mobility are the fundamental attitudes of the charism. The Vincentian spirit was born with St. Vincent de Paul, who in 1617 founded the Confraternities of Charity, today the AIC. Later, in 1625 he founded the Congregation of the Mission. Finally in 1633, with St. Louise de Marillac, he founded the Company of the Daughters of Charity. At the time of his death, foundations were already present in several countries outside of France: Poland, Italy, Algeria, Madagascar and Scotland.³³

10. Mary in the Vincentian spirituality³⁴

Mary is not an add-on to the Vincentian Family, nor the exclusive devotion of one group or Association. Mary shows the Vincentian Family the way to live in union with Jesus Christ and to listen to his Word in order to serve others. Marian devotion within the Vincentian way is moderate in its expressions in a deep practical sense. Mary is teacher of the spiritual life and she teaches us to listen attentively to the Word. She is the mother who intercedes showing us the way of prayer and the place of the poor as our only place of life. She teaches us to live attentive to the needs of the poor and how to serve them. St. Vincent said: “The most Blessed Virgin went out to provide for the needs of her family and the comfort and consolation of her neighbors; but she always did so in the presence of God.”³⁵ He told the Daughters of Charity that she was the teacher from whom we should learn the care, vigilance and love that she has for her Son.³⁶

The apparitions to St. Catherine Labouré took place precisely when the Vincentian Family began to be reborn after having been dispersed and, in a certain measure, dissolved by the French Revolution. In the decades following

³³ Cf., Coste, Conferences to the CMs, N° 167, p. 375. We know that St. Vincent himself was ready to go on Mission: “...And I myself, old and infirm as I am, should not cease to be disposed, aye, even to set out for the Indies to win souls to God, even though I were to die on the way, or on board ship...”

³⁴ For this point I used the Conference of Robert Maloney, C.M., *Asociación de la Medalla Milagrosa. Una nueva imagen para un nuevo Milenio*, Ed. La Milagrosa, Madrid, 2002.

³⁵ Coste, Conferences to the DCs, N° 31, p. 303.

³⁶ Cf., Coste, Conferences to the DCs, N° 16, p. 127.

1830 our Family experienced a significant renaissance.³⁷ We know that from this event of Mary's love two important branches would be born: the JMV and the AMM.

It is said that Frederick Ozanam was wearing the medal when he founded the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul in 1833.³⁸ In 1843, he himself wrote a notice about a work that contained the first printed account of the apparitions to St. Catherine Labouré. On 4 February 1834, Ozanam made the request to place the recently founded Conferences under the protection of the Blessed Virgin. He chose the feast of the Immaculate Conception as the patronal feast. This proposition was unanimously accepted by the members of the Society.

The AIC up until 1959 made an Act of Consecration on 8 December, whereby they would invoke Mary under the title of the Immaculate Conception. Together with the Daughters of Charity and the members of the Congregation of the Mission, they were the most active distributors of the medal after the apparitions to St. Catherine Labouré.

C. Word about diversity

Time does not allow us to go into detail on this equally important subject, for one cannot talk about unity as uniformity. We speak of unity coming from common realities and the realities that make us different. We have a common richness and we are strong in our "being diverse." Differences exist between our various Associations and it is a challenge for us to discover and live them out for they become our greatest wealth for effective collaboration. No one Association can exhaust the richness of the Vincentian spirit and this has its effects. The various Associations have different histories, different ways of working for the poor, different nuances within their spirituality. The efforts, that numerous countries put forth to establish the Vincentian Family on a solid base, are not with the intention of homogenizing the various institutions, but of developing mutual understanding, mutual support and collaboration.³⁹

Conclusion

Accompanying the laity of the different Associations requires us to know, in a precise enough way, and live the realities of the Vincentian Spirit common to all of us and have theoretical and practical knowledge of these elements that are distinct within each Association.

³⁷ For details on the growth of the Vincentian Family during this period, cf. René Laurentin and Philippe Roche, C.M., *Catherine Labouré et la Médaille Miraculeuse* (Lazaristes, Filles de la Charité, Dessain and Tolra: Paris, 1976). Cf., especially, pp. 66ff. Cf., also, René Laurentin, *Vie authentique de Catherine Labouré*, (Desclée De Brower, Lazaristes, Filles de la Charité: Paris, 1980).

³⁸ René Laurentin, *op. cit.*, I Récit., p. 189.

³⁹ Cf., Collection, *Avivar la Caridad*, n. 3, Ed. CEME, Salamanca 2002, p. 238.

According to what has been said in the course of this presentation, we can affirm that an identity exists that unites all the members of the Vincentian Family but we can equally affirm that each Association has its own proper identity. We can deduce, with certainty, that all the Associations cannot have the same type of accompaniment. Each Association has its own style and this requires a detailed knowledge of the Association and deep respect for its proper autonomy from the person who is accompanying it.

I will close by saying that the members of the Vincentian Family are those who live their life as Jesus Christ, doing good, convinced, along with St. Vincent, that *those who love the poor during their lives will have no fear of death when it comes.*⁴⁰ And again, with St. Vincent, that *“We cannot better assure our eternal happiness than by living and dying in the service of the poor, in the arms of Providence, and with genuine renouncement of ourselves in order to follow Jesus Christ.”*⁴¹

(Translation: TRANSLATION CENTER – DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY, Paris)

⁴⁰ Cf., Coste, Vol. 1, p. 587.

⁴¹ Coste, Vol. 3, p. 384.