

**Vincentian Month 2002**  
**Advisors of the Vincentian Family**  
Paris, 7-26 July 2002

**Final Synthesis**

**“Now is the time for a new ‘creativity’ in charity”**  
(John Paul II, *NMI*, 50)

**Introduction**

One hundred ten Advisors of the Vincentian Family, originating from 46 countries throughout the world, gathered at the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity and reflected during the Vincentian Month on the role of the Advisor of the Vincentian Family. At certain times during the meeting, some of the international leaders of the Vincentian Family were present.

The objectives of the meeting were: to deepen the knowledge of our founders, to know the nature and work of the branches of the Vincentian Family, and to identify better our role as Advisors.

Nearly 400 years ago, St. Vincent undertook in France a process for the holistic promotion of the poor, for which he gathered men and women. He invited these persons to give of themselves in order to remedy the needs of the poor, convinced by faith, that “to serve the poor is to serve Jesus Christ” (SV IX, 252). This work continues today in many countries of the world where the Vincentian Family is present.

“There is a diversity of gifts but the same Spirit. There is a diversity of services, but the same Lord. There is a diversity of works but the same God who accomplishes all of them in everyone” (1 Cor 12:4-6). So the Vincentian Family exists in the Church, as a human and charitable potential, made up of persons capable of loving the poor affectively and effectively (cf., SV IX, 593). The Vincentian charism is secular: its members sanctify themselves by living their mission in the midst of the world.

The branches of the Vincentian Family that up the present have maintained close bonds are: The International Association of Charities, today AIC (1617: 260,000 members); the Congregation of the Mission, CM (1625: 4,000 members); the Company of the Daughters of Charity, DC (1633: 23,000 members), the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, SSVP (1833: 530,000 members), the Vincentian Marian Youth, JMV (1847: 65,000 registered members), the Association of the Miraculous Medal, AMM (1909: one million enrolled members) and the Lay Vincentian Missionaries, MISEVI (1999: 30 members).

Added to these, there are many other associations and congregations which nourish their spirit in the own sources of the Vincentian charism.

## **1. FAITHFUL TO THE GOSPEL, THE CHURCH AND ST. VINCENT**

### **1.1. Reality**

#### **The world, the poor and youth**

1. We live in a time of enormous material growth to which moral growth does not always correspond. In our changing and pluralistic world, violence, conflict and injustice are increasing. Among different peoples and cultures poverty is increasing and the faces of the poor are multiplying from the negative effects of the existing economic and political order, while the rich are getting richer. Social exclusion and immigration are today serious expressions of poverty. Humanity has become more and more interdependent and experiences the effects of globalization.
2. Youth, particularly, experience confusion in the presence of thousands of opportunities. In contrast with this, many of them do not even have the possibility of choices and have little hope.

#### **The Church and the laity**

3. The course of history and the events of the world today require a new posture of the Church in the world.
4. Its numerical presence is shifting rapidly to new geographical areas.
5. One aspires to a more serving, ecumenical, and friendly Church and with more flexible structures.
6. We can affirm that this is the “era and the hour of the laity.” They are an emerging force in the Church and a transforming presence in the world by the strength of their commitment as baptized.
7. The understanding of their identity and mission in the Church is increasing among the laity; however, there still exists in some places a clerical mentality that creates conflict and discouragement and tends toward regression.
8. On many occasions, the role of the laity is not supported, and it is utilized only when there is need.

#### **The Vincentian Charism**

9. Vincent de Paul — ahead of his time — created spaces for the participation of the laity, particularly that of women. He organized new

institutions and opened up ways so that they might exercise their ministry. He trusted them; he involved them decidedly in the mission of the Church; he consulted them on projects and decisions, and helped them to discover Christ in the poor.

## **1.2 Convictions**

### **Laity in the Church**

1. “The Church exists to evangelize” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, N, 14) and “the Holy Spirit is the principal agent of the Church’s mission” (*Redemptoris Missio*, 21, 30).
2. The Church, the People of God, is called to live in communion and participation.
3. The laity are “the faithful who, by Baptism are incorporated into Christ and integrated into the People of God, are made sharers in their particular way in the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ, and have their own part to play in the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world” (*Lumen Gentium*, 31). They are called to holiness, understood as passion for God and passion for man.
4. The layperson is a full member of the Church and, therefore, a subject not an object.
5. “To achieve the Christian animation of the temporal order, in the sense of serving persons and society, the lay faithful are never to relinquish their participation in ‘public life’; that is, in the many different economic, social, legislative, administrative and cultural areas which are intended to promote organically and institutionally the common good” (*Cristifideles Laici*, 42).

### **Service**

6. Service to a brother/sister pertains to the very essence of the gospel (cf Mk 10:45); as a matter of fact, Vincentian laypersons are the baptized who live the love of God manifested in a practical and direct charity and service of the poor.
7. To St. Vincent, encounter with God leads him to the poor and these return him to God. The poor evangelize us; “it is among them, among this poor people, where true religion is maintained” (SV XI, 200-201).
8. The poor have to be agents of their own promotion. No one can reach the responsibility satisfactorily when decent living conditions are lacking.

## **1.3 Commitments**

1. To heed the signs of the time in order to give them an adequate response as Vincentians.
2. To establish a greater awareness of Church-communion and participation, assuming its consequences.
3. To carry out our mission in collaboration with the local Churches.
4. To design formation programs which include information on the Social Doctrine of the Church.
5. To empower the ministry of the laity and develop pastoral projects with them.
6. To create more spaces for the promotion and participation of women.
7. To inculturate the gospel and promote interreligious dialog in countries in which Christianity is a minority.

## **2. THE NATURE AND WORK OF THE VINCENTIAN FAMILY**

### **2.1 Reality**

1. Fr. Robert Maloney, Superior General, together with the international leaders of the Vincentian Family, has promoted in us the feeling of Family, stimulating collaboration from one's own identity and autonomy. This call has had a very positive echo at the provincial, national and local levels.
2. The need for formation has become apparent, accompaniment and information at all levels.
3. The Vincentian Family, in its members, needs adequate adjustment and updating to the reality of each country or culture. Some branches live this process of inculturation, including dialog between religions, from an ongoing reflection and analysis and succeed in developing the shape of practicing charity.
4. There is ignorance about the branches of the Vincentian Family and this is an obstacle for collaboration and accompaniment.
5. Some branches of the Vincentian Family are aging in their members. A tiredness is detected and, in some, a fear of change. There is perceived a diminishing in numbers in the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity.
6. In practice, a great part of the help that is given to the poor has a welfare character.

### **2.2 Convictions**

#### **Spirituality**

1. Jesus Christ, “Evangelizer and Servant of the Poor” (cf Lk 4:18), is the center of our life and the foundation of Vincentian spirituality (cf., SV, I, 295).
2. The Vincentian charism is not exhausted in any particular branch of the Vincentian Family; it persists and is strengthened by the fidelity of the men and women that live in each epoch; they update it and share it.
3. The poor help us to get out of ourselves, of our selfishness and fears and give meaning to our life; they are for the members of the Vincentian Family “the sacrament of Christ”: “turn the other side of the medal and you will see with the light of faith that they are those who represent the Son of God, who wished to be poor” (SV XI, 32).
4. A simple lifestyle, an attitude of evangelical humility, a holistic life, and a confidence in providence are characteristic elements of Vincentian spirituality and basic attitudes for the evangelization of the poor.
5. Compassion, solidarity and attentive listening to the cry of the poor, the fight against injustices and the defense of their rights are all expressions of Vincentian charity.
6. Mary leads us to Christ: “Do whatever he tells you” (Jn 2:5). St. Vincent and St. Louise propose Mary as a model and mother of the spiritual life. Mary is the person who inspires in the Vincentian charism an evangelical lifestyle and a commitment to the dispossessed.

### **The Poor**

7. Personal contact with the poor is indispensable for every member of the Vincentian Family. The poor are the suffering face of Christ today.
8. The poor one is, first and foremost, a person. His/her self-promotion frees him/her from attitudes of dependency.
9. We note new poverties and new poor who demand from us new forms of exercising charity, adapted to reality and to the challenges of the current world.
10. The development of charity requires a process of reflection, analysis, dialog and action, adapted to the situation of the world and of the poor; then “love is inventive to infinity” (SV XI, 146).

### **Collaboration**

11. In the Vincentian Family, similarities unite us and differences enrich us.
12. The development of common projects, instead of a solo exercise of action without planning, keeps us in a process of revision and of updating and this makes us be even more creative and effective.

### **2.3 Commitments**

### **As Vincentian Family**

1. To deepen in common elements and to know and value the identity, history and processes of each branch.
2. To seek, as Vincentian Family and with others, the causes of poverty and to offer from our charism creative answers in the short, medium and long term.
3. To promote in our projects and organized structures, a style of service that favors the dignity, self-promotion and the direct participation of the poor.
4. To promote a culture of collaboration.
5. To avoid focusing on rivalries and ourselves.

### **For formation and communication**

6. To nourish our prayer with action and our action with prayer: “give me a man of prayer and he will be capable of everything” (SV XI, 83).
7. To give priority to holistic and ongoing formation at all levels and to accept with responsibility self-formation.
8. To favor periodic meetings between the different branches for knowledge, formation and collaboration.
9. To share with generosity human, material and spiritual resources.
10. To create channels of communication inside and outside the branches.
11. To share as Vincentian Family the richness that the Internet offers us and to favor a greater access of the poor to this instrument.

## **3. THE ROLE OF THE ADVISOR IN THE GROUPS OF THE VINCENTIAN FAMILY**

### **3.1 Reality**

#### **The influence of society**

1. As Advisors, we are conscious that today’s society does not provide sufficient openness to the spiritual dimension and that today’s family does not always foster a religious direction. Because of this, youth seek, above all, witnesses and an experience of what is spiritual. Many youth and adults discover that they need less things and more peace in order to appreciate the treasures that they have within and to share them with others. Each one, as good soil, contains the possibility of germinating.

#### **The experience of the founders**

2. Vincent de Paul in his relationship with Louise de Marillac shows us his ability to understand every trial, to discover human potential, to guide, to listen, to assign a mission, and how to wait. He relates to Louise as a collaborator and not as one “directed.”
3. Louise de Marillac, on her part, took on the role of animator. From her experience as animator we can learn that it is important to receive preliminary information about the groups that we advise, to live the mission with faith, to prepare oneself spiritually in order to accomplish it, to know how to listen, to consult, to establish and dedicate enough time for accompaniment.

### **The Role of advising**

4. Difficulties in the area of advising are well-known because of ignorance or confusion over the role of the Advisor and of inadequate methods and attitudes.
5. In some cases there is little availability for this ministry and appointments are made without previous preparation of those responsible. In other cases, the task is assumed out of obedience, not by vocation, and as something added to the mission.
6. The lack of formation in the Advisors manifests itself in welfarism, dependence, desire for the limelight, improvisation, and a certain spirit of competitiveness. Some Advisors are overloaded with work.
7. The laity has begun to assume the role of Advisor of groups in the Vincentian Family.

## **3.2 Convictions**

### **The Spiritual Dimension**

1. The goal of the Advisor of the Vincentian Family is to follow Christ, Evangelizer and Servant of the Poor, assisting persons and groups to incarnate Vincentian spirituality.
2. A good Advisor has personal experience of Christ, St. Vincent and the poor, lives in union with God and with the group, and prays for and with it. Before that of an expert in theology and spirituality, the Advisor is a witness (cf., *EN*, 41), is docile to the Spirit and waits with patience for results. His/her vocation identifies with that of John the Baptist: to present Jesus (cf., Jn 1:29, 36).

### **The Human Profile**

3. We believe that an authentic Advisor strives to incarnate the following characteristics: maturity, confidence in oneself, self-esteem, a balance of

life and openness to the signs of the times. He/she is a good friend, capable of being a guide and of inspiring trust. The Advisor has the ability to listen, learns from others and is humble. He/she assumes his/her rightful place as Advisor, and from there is able to work more as a member of the group instead of projecting him/herself as authoritarian and creating dependency. He/she is peaceful and simple, with a good sense of humor. The Advisor respects the pace of persons, favors autonomy and is impartial. He/she is a missionary with a universal and ecclesial consciousness and has broad views. The Advisor is a good communicator and is able to express his/herself. He/she believes in and maintains good relationships with persons and institutions.

4. The Advisor promotes an inquiring spirit, responsibility, subsidiarity, a sense of justice and is in solidarity with the sufferings of others. He/she knows the association with which he/she works, dedicates time for accompaniment, promotes talents and gives rise to creativity.

### **Formation**

5. The Advisor fosters and accompanies holistic formation, processes, apostolic reflection and guides the group toward a liberating service.
6. The preparation of Advisors and of the laity is fundamental for maintaining the vitality of our associations.

### **3.3 Commitments**

1. To create spaces for the experience of God and of discernment, to assist in drawing up a personal and group project of life and to promote apostolic reflection.
2. To assure that apostolic activities have an authentic Vincentian character.
3. To learn from the spiritual, formative and life experience of the laity.
4. To promote the missionary vocation in the laity.
5. To organize periodic meetings of the Advisors at all levels and to procure funds and material resources for formation.
6. To promote the sense of unity and belonging in the Vincentian Family.
7. To promote the development, the approbation and/or the updating of statutes.

## **4. SUGGESTIONS TO IMPROVE THE SERVICE TO LAY GROUPS OF THE VINCENTIAN FAMILY**

1. To establish an international program of formation, including financial and material resources, and their exchange at all levels.

2. To create, where it does not exist, a council or a local, national or regional coordination of the Vincentian Family in order to establish communication, formation and collaboration.
3. To prepare in the provinces of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity Advisors for the different branches of the Vincentian Family, commencing with initial formation.
4. To free Advisors for accompaniment of the different lay Vincentian groups as far as possible and in accordance with needs.
5. To prepare the laity of the Vincentian Family for the role of Advisor of the same groups of lay Vincentians.
6. To set up in our locales formation schools for the laity.
7. To design a systematic program of knowledge of each one of the branches of the Vincentian Family to use especially during initial formation.
8. To organize courses in the Social Doctrine of the Church at different levels.

(RONALD RAMSON, C.M., translator)