

Vincentian Month 2002:

ADVISORS
OF THE VINCENTIAN FAMILY

Paris, 7-26 July, 2002

CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION
GENERAL CURIA

Presentation

Through the initiative and invitation of the Superior General of the CM and the Daughters of Charity, Robert Maloney, CM, an invitation was addressed to all the provinces of the two Communities to participate in the First **Vincentian Month for Advisors of the Lay Groups of the Vincentian Family**, which was held in Paris, 7-26 July 2002. The response was very positive with 64 Daughters of Charity, 44 members of the CM, two religious from other Congregations and one laywoman participating. We were able to count on the leadership presence of some of the branches of the Vincentian Family who accompanied us, especially during the second week of this meeting.

The Organizing Commission (Roberto Lovera, CM, representing SIEV; Sr. Margaret Barrett, DC; Marina Costa, AIC; and Benjamín Romo, CM) began preparations by selecting topics that would most likely help participants reflect on the Advisor's role and tasks in today's Church. The Commission set the meeting's objectives: deepen the understanding of our Founders' doctrine, know the branches and works of the Vincentian Family and discover better our role as Advisors. They divided the topics into three parts: 1) Faithful to the Gospel, the Church and St. Vincent; 2) the Being and Work of the Vincentian Family; 3) the Role of the Advisor to the groups of the Vincentian Family.

The deepening of these three themes was achieved through conferences, group work, summaries, sharing experiences and a weekly syntheses. The location of the meeting (Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity) and visits to Vincentian places in Paris, allowed participants to deepen their **fidelity to the Gospel, to the Church** and naturally **to our Founders**, for they too were animators of Confraternities of Charity and the two nascent Communities.

The International Heads of the AIC, SSVdP, JMV, AMM, and MISEVI participated in this Vincentian Month, giving conferences, responding to questions and being present in work groups divided into Associations. In this way they helped us know better the **being and work of the Vincentian Associations**. Their presence contributed significantly to a better current knowledge of these Associations, their projects and their formation plans. Their conversations gave us the possibility of specifically clarifying our task as Advisors for we were able to listen to their expectations of us. One of the important points of their work in common was to strengthen awareness and collaboration among councillors and laity within the Vincentian Family in such a way that, together, we can offer more efficacious answers to today's poverties. We have come a long way but there still is a long way to go.

The third week we directed our attention toward what is specific to us: **the role and tasks of the Vincentian Advisor**. The topics reflected upon led us to focus our work as Advisors in relation to formation, the spiritual life and the Vincentian lay apostolate. Work groups by Association allowed us to take on specific commitments.

Thanks to the work of a commission composed of some participants, we were able to have a **Final Synthesis** at the end of the meeting that summarized the three weeks. They presented the contents in an outline form with order and precision: realities, convictions, commitments and suggestions. Certainly, this material offers us an idea of all the richness contained in what was presented, both in the conferences and in the work groups.

The prayer in common at the beginning of each day and the four Eucharists celebrated with all the participants were important times that helped to live and work in a climate of God and of openness to the Spirit. The wonderful disposition of everyone created a very positive and joy-filled environment in the midst of hard work. In the final evaluation the participants indicated a very positive experience of the Vincentian Month.

We want to thank all our brothers and sisters who, with much love and dedication, gave the best of themselves in doing their bit in order to provide a quality meeting. We thank, in particular, the Translation Center of the Daughters of Charity of the Motherhouse for the enormous work undertaken before, during, and after the Meeting. We also thank the members of the Editorial Board of *Vincentiana*. Thanks to them, we will be able to offer to all of you the material that today we are placing in their hands. We offer it to you who participated and also to all who, for various reasons, were not able to be present, but with love and perseverance, accomplish this mission of support to the lay groups. Lastly, we offer it to all those who are convinced that *“It is not enough for me to love God if my neighbor does not love him”* (Coste, Conferences to CMs, N° 207, p. 583).

Vincentian Month Organizing Commission

Vincentian Month 2002: Advisors of the Vincentian Family

Participants

	NAME	Group	Province/Country
1.	ABI-SAÏD Gladys	JMV	Lebanon
2.	AGUASANTA María Teresa	JMV	Dominican Republic
3.	ALVARES Margaret	DC	Northern India
4.	ANDONAIRE Vilma	DC	Peru
5.	ARGÜELLO María	DC	Bogotá, Colombia
6.	ARMANI Gherardo	CM	Turin, Italy
7.	ARMELLINI Francisco	CM	Venezuela
8.	AZZI Rania	DC	Near East
9.	BAGALSO Francisca	DC	Thailand
10.	BANASZEK Teresa	DC	Warsaw, Poland
11.	BARRETT Margaret	DC	General Council, Paris
12.	BAUMANN Denise	SCS	France
13.	BEWERRA Carla	DC	Mozambique
14.	BIN Patrizia	DC	Siena, Italy
15.	BUENO Consuelo	DC	Santo Domingo
16.	BURGOS Faustino	CM	Puerto Rico
17.	ČAKŠ Andreja	DC	Slovenia
18.	CAMARGO Gilson	CM	Curitiba, Brazil
19.	CASTILLERO Juventino	CM	Central America
20.	CASTILLO Pedro	CM	Venezuela
21.	CHAFIC Marie	DC	Near East
22.	COCHLA Lila	DC	Haiti
23.	COSTA Marina	AIC	Italy
24.	DE PAULA Agnaldo	CM	Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
25.	DE LA OSA M. Paz	DC	Madrid, Santa Luisa (Spain)
26.	DEBES Claire	DC	Emmitsburg, USA
27.	DEL PINO Clotilde	DC	Canary Islands, Spain
28.	DI TANO Antonia	DC	Naples, Italy
29.	DÍAZ-TORREMOCHA José Ramón	SSVP	Spain
30.	DISU Bienvenido	CM	Philippines
31.	DOSMAN Olga	DC	Cali, Colombia
32.	DOYLE Angela	DC	Ireland
33.	ECHEVERRÍA María Isabel	DC	Pamplona, Spain
34.	ESCOBAR Orlando	CM	General Curia, Rome
35.	ESPINOSA Rosa	DC	Mexico
36.	EZEIMO Felizia	DC	Nigeria
37.	FALCO Biagio	CM	Naples, Italy
38.	FORTI Roberto	SSVP	Italy

	NAME	Group	Province/Country
39.	FRANGIE Zahya	DC	Near East
40.	GARCÍA Argentina	DC	Venezuela
41.	GARCIA Martha	DC	Los Altos Hills, USA
42.	GAVEN John	CM	Australia
43.	GONÇALVES Carlos	CM	Fortaleza, Brazil
44.	GONZÁLEZ Alicia	DC	Cuba
45.	GROETSCH Sharon	DC	St. Louis, USA
46.	GROSSI Mario	CM	Turin, Italy
47.	HAMPEL Donata	DC	Salzburg, Austria
48.	HARIO Heribertus	CM	Indonesia
49.	JURADO Isabel	DC	Granada, Spain
50.	JURKYOVÁ Alena	DC	Rome, Italy
51.	KIÉ Anastasie	NDP	Ivory Coast
52.	KOTTO-WAVE Etienne	CM	Congo
53.	KRAUSE Bruce	CM	USA, East
54.	LARANJEIRO M. Adelia	DC	Portugal
55.	LETTEMARIAM Mogos	DC	Eritrea
56.	LÓPEZ M. Cruz	DC	San Sebastián, Spain
57.	LOVERA Roberto	CM	Turin
58.	LUPA Lidia	DC	Kraków, Poland
59.	MACÍAS Fernando	CM	Chile
60.	MANUNTA Piera	DC	Cerdeña, Italy
61.	MARRAS Angelo	CM	Rome, Italy
62.	MARTÍNEZ Francisca	DC	Chile
63.	McCULLAGH Michael	CM	Ireland
64.	MENU André	DC	Belgium
65.	MONJAS Concepción	DC	Madrid, San Vicente (Spain)
66.	NAVA Patricia de	AIC	Mexico
67.	NIETO Felipe	CM	Madrid, Spain
68.	NTAWE Immaculée	DC	Central Africa
69.	PALACIOS Lucía	DC	Central America
70.	PANZERI M. Felicita	DC	Turin, Italy
71.	PARTH Florian	CM	Austria
72.	PASCUAL Ángel	CM	Zaragoza, Spain
73.	PASCUAL M. Josefa	DC	North Africa
74.	PATO Andrés	CM	Salamanca, Spain
75.	PAUCAR María Gladys	DC	Ecuador
76.	PEREIRA J. Gil	CM	Portugal
77.	PÉREZ J. Gerardo	CM	Cuba
78.	PÉREZ Oliday	DC	Cuba
79.	PERUGACHI Segundo	CM	Ecuador
80.	POLÁKOVA Damiana	DC	Slovakia

	NAME	Group	Province/Country
81.	PREVOT Bernadette	DC	France
82.	RAKOTONIRINA J. Lucien	CM	Madagascar
83.	RALAIVAO Ruffine	DC	Madagascar
84.	RAMSON Ronald	CM	USA, Midwest
85.	RICHARDT Sharon	DC	Evansville, USA
86.	ROMO Benjamín	CM	General Curia, Rome
87.	SALAZAR Lady	DC	Bolivia
88.	SALVO Dolores	DC	Barcelona, Spain
89.	SÁNCHEZ A. Servando	CM	Mexico
90.	SÁNCHEZ Miguel	CM	Mozambique
91.	SANTILLÁN Gloria	JMV	Spain
92.	SANTOS Ricardo	CM	Salamanca, Spain
93.	SCHMITZ Erich	SSVP	Germany
94.	SCHOEPFER Bernard	CM	Paris, France
95.	SEBESTYÉN É. Marianna	DC	Hungary
96.	SERVITO Nieves	DC	Philippines
97.	SHELBY Charles	CM	USA, Midwest
98.	SILVA Ileana	DC	Puerto Rico
99.	SOARES Juarez	CM	Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
100.	SULLIVAN Theresa	DC	Evansville, USA
101.	TALAPKANYCH Mikhaylo	CM	Sts. Cyril and Methodius
102.	TAMLYN Gwen	DC	Australia
103.	TECLEMICAEL Tewolde	CM	Eritrea
104.	TESFAY Medhin	DC	Ethiopia
105.	TINKLER Maureen	DC	Great Britain
106.	TORO Rogelio	CM	Colombia
107.	TYPAMM Emmanuel	CM	Paris, France
108.	URDAMPILLETA Edurne	JMV	Spain
109.	UREÑA Fulvio	CM	Costa Rica
110.	VARELA Francisca	DC	Gijón, Spain
111.	VÁSQUEZ Diego L.	CM	Colombia
112.	VELASCO Rosa	DC	Seville, Spain
113.	VICUÑA Concepción	DC	Cameroon
114.	VILLAR Eva	MISEVI	Spain
115.	WALKER Margaret	DC	Albany, USA
116.	YAACOUB Caroline	DC	Near East

AIC: International Association of Charities
CM : Congregation of the Mission
DC: Daughters of Charity
JMV: Vincentian Marian Youth
MISEVI: Vincentian Lay Missionaries

NDP: Sisters of Our Lady of Peace
SCS: Sisters of Charity of Strasbourg
SSVP: Saint Vincent de Paul Society

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

Program

1st Week

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

Monday, 8 July

08:30	Conference Room
08:45	Welcome: <i>Juana Elizondo, D.C.</i> (Superioress General)
09:15	Eucharistic Liturgy, <i>Robert P. Maloney, C.M.</i> (Superior General)
10:45	- Overview of Program and work process - Welcome from the Sister Servant of the Mother House; Practical information
12:00	End of morning session
15:30	Presentation of the branches of the Vincentian Family (AIC, SSVP, Vincentian Marian Youth [JMV], Miraculous Medal Association [AMM], MISEVI, others...)
16:30	Break
17:00	Getting to know each other: Expectations of the participants
18:30	End of afternoon session

Tuesday, 9 July

09:00	Some Qualities of a Good Formator , <i>Robert P. Maloney, C.M.</i>
09 :45	Personal reflection (questions)
10:30	Break
11:00	Group work
12:00	End of morning session
15:30	The Laity in Today's Church , <i>Jean Landousies, C.M.</i>
16:30	Break
17:00	Group work
18:30	End of afternoon session

Wednesday, 10 July

09:00	St. Vincent de Paul and Lay Ministry , <i>John Prager, C. M.</i>
10:00	Group work
10:45	Break
11:15	Sharing of experiences
12:00	End of morning session

Afternoon Free

Thursday, 11 July

09:00 **To Serve the Poor Spiritually and Corporally, John Prager, C. M.**
09:45 Sharing of experiences
10:30 Break
11:00 Group work
12:00 End of morning session
15:30 Group work
16:30 Break
17:00 Discussion in plenary session
18:30 End of afternoon session

Friday, 12 July

09:00 **Letting Ourselves Be Evangelized by the Poor, Eva Villar, MISEVI**
10:00 Break
10:30 Apostolic reflection and prayer in groups on the experience of a week with the poor in one's own country *Sharon Richardt, D.C.*

Saturday, 13 July

09:00 **Marian Spirituality in the Vincentian Charism (Part I), Corpus Delgado, C.M.**
09:45 Break
10:15 **Marian Spirituality in the Vincentian Charism (Part II), Corpus Delgado, C.M.**
11:00 Group work
12:00 End of morning session
15:30 Group work: important points, lines of action, difficulties, commitments
17:30 End of afternoon session

Sunday, 14 July Free

2nd Week

THE BEING AND WORKING OF THE VINCENTIAN FAMILY

Monday, 15 July

09:00 Prayer and overview of work for the week
09:15 **The Commitment of the Laity in the World and the Church Today (Part I), Asdrúbal J. Baptista, SSVP**
10:15 Break
11:45 Group work

12:15 End of morning session
 15:30 **The Commitment of the Laity in the World and the Church Today**
 (Part II), *Asdrúbal J. Baptista, SSVP*
 16:30 Break
 17:00 Discussion
 18:30 End of afternoon session

Tuesday, 16 July

09:00 **The Evolution of Charity**, *Patricia P. de Nava, AIC*
 10:00 Plenary session - questions, answers, clarifications about the
 presentation
 10:30 Break
 11:00 **Working through Projects**, *Patricia P. de Nava, AIC*
 12:00 End of morning session
 15:30 **The Advisor and the Evolution of Charity**, *Patricia P. de Nava, AIC*
 15:45 Work groups (Activity: Debono's Hat)
 16:30 Break
 17:00 Discussion
 17:30 **Presentation of Vincentian sites to be visited**,
Marie-Geneviève Roux, D.C.
 18:30 End of afternoon session

Wednesday, 17 July Pilgrimage to Vincentian sites in Paris

16:00 Eucharistic Liturgy in Clichy, *Bernard Schoepfer, C.M.*

Thursday, 18 July

09:00 **Presentation of the Vincentian Family:**
 AIC, SSVP, JMV, AMM, MISEVI
 12:00 End of morning session
 15:30 Panel with the Presidents of each branch
 17:00 Eucharistic Liturgy in Mother House Chapel, Michael McCullagh, C.M.

Friday, 19 July

09:00 **Unifying Elements of the Vincentian Family**, *Benjamín Romo, C.M.*
 10:00 Break
 10:30 Group work by regions or continents
 12:00 End of morning session
 15:30 **St. Louise: Animator of the Charities**, *Elisabeth Charpy, D.C.*
 16:30 Break
 17:00 Groups: How to update the work of animation
 17:45 Plenary session

18:30 End of afternoon session

Saturday, 20 July

09:00 Synthesis Commission

09:20 - **Presentation of the Web Page of the Vincentian Family, Orlando Escobar, C.M.**

- Group work to note important points, lines of action, with the presidents of each branch

11:00 Plenary session

12:00 End of morning session

Afternoon Free

Sunday, 21 July Free

3rd Week

THE ROLE OF THE ADVISOR

Monday, 22 July

09:00 Prayer and overview of work for the week

09:15 **The Role of the Advisor within Lay Groups of the Vincentian Family, José Antonio Ubillús, C.M.**

10:00 Group work

12:00 End of morning session

15:30 **The Advisor and the Spiritual Life, Edurne Urdampilleta, JMV**

16:15 Break

16:45 Group work

17:30 Plenary session

18:30 End of afternoon session

Tuesday, 23 July

09:00 **The Advisor and Formation – Animation of Groups, Edurne Urdampilleta, JMV**

09:45 Questions and discussion

10:30 Break

11:00 Work groups

12:00 End of morning session

15:30 **The Advisor and the Apostolic Mission of Lay Vincentians, Jaime Corera, C.M.**

16:15 Group work

17:00 Break

17:30 Questions and discussion
18:30 End of afternoon session

Wednesday, 24 July

09:00 **Juridical and Canonical Dimensions of the Associations,**
Alberto Vernaschi, C.M.
10:30 Break
11:00 Group work
12:00 End of morning session
15:30 Continuation of morning work
18:30 End of afternoon session

Thursday, 25 July

09:00 **How to Communicate the Lived Experience in One's Own Country,**
Benjamín Romo, C.M.
09:30 Personal reflection
10:00 Break
10:30 Group work
12:00 End of morning session
15:30 Presentation of the Vincentian Family Project:
The Globalization of Charity: The Fight against Hunger
(Congo-Italy project)
16:30 Break
17:00 Group work
18:00 Evaluation of the Session in groups
18:30 End of afternoon session

Friday, 26 July

09:00 **Presentation of the Final Synthesis, *Synthesis Commission***
11:00 Closing Eucharistic Liturgy (Chapel of St. Vincent de Paul, Rue de
Sèvres) *Benjamín Romo, C.M.*
12:00 Closing of the Vincentian Month

**Greeting of Welcome
from the Superioress General of the Daughters of Charity**

My very dear Fathers, Sisters and Advisors of lay branches of the Vincentian Family,

First of all, welcome to the Mother House of the Daughters of Charity, the place that you have chosen to have your meeting. The General Council and all the sisters of the house welcome you with joy and will do their best to foster this atmosphere of joy for this very important and significant meeting for the Vincentian laity and the Vincentian Family in general. I believe that it is the first meeting of this kind, or at least of this magnitude, in our history.

The house is at your disposal, given what we have and what we do not have! We are here to help create, as far as we can, a pleasant atmosphere for your meeting.

We would not be content to just offer you the physical and material set-up of this house. This house is also a house of prayer in which you will participate in a special way throughout these days. I am speaking not only of the Chapel, which is a privileged place of prayer, but of our elder sisters who have promised to keep you in their prayers. As for me, I also promise to pray the Our Father in a special way, asking the Lord to fulfill all my hopes for you as Advisors, and in general, for the branches of the Family that have been confided to you.

May this be a family-centered meeting, for we are all brothers and sisters, and in this case, we have special bonds that unite us as children of the one “**Father**” whom we call “**Our**.” May you experience in this atmosphere, the joy of belonging to the same Christian and Vincentian family, sharing the same spirit and charism.

May “**hallowed be thy name**” permeate all that we do. The best way to do this is to be saints. I believe that what John Paul II says to missionaries in his encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio*, is also applicable to Advisors: “The true missionary is a saint, a man or woman of the Beatitudes” (cf. *RM*, 90-91). In the same way, the true Advisor will be a saint, the man or woman of the Beatitudes. This will be the best way, or rather, the only way to be “witnesses” of the gospel and “prophets” who announce God’s love and tenderness to the poor.

May your principal goal be spreading the **Kingdom of God**. You have been privileged; you have been personally called by name to contribute to the *New Evangelization* through the group that you animate. This is also the best way to accomplish the **Will of God** because, in the end, that is the only thing to

which we aspire. This was also the force behind all great works accomplished in the Church of God, as well as the desire our Founders expressed so many times.

May the Lord also give you your **daily bread**, the courage you need in order to begin each day with enthusiasm and the necessary means to transmit the message to others. The expert presenters are going to obtain for you the doctrinal nourishment you are seeking and which will enrich and sustain you in your work. May you also know how to share: those who have more with those who do not have enough. Certainly, you all have much to give to others and much to receive from others. I see some faces here that I know well, who have been working at this for a long time and who can offer you their experience. This sharing, this exchange is perhaps one of the most enriching aspects of these meetings. I notice this same thing during international sessions at the Mother House for the sisters. When I ask them what impressed them the most, it is always the visit to the Archives that they name first. There, one is able to reflect upon the writings of the Founders which, in addition to being important documents of doctrine, are true relics for us. The second aspect that impresses them is the internationality itself, which enables them to put faces on people they have heard about. During these meetings, events, presentations, successes, failures, difficulties are shared and seen for their true value. Together, you can analyze the “whys” and seek and suggest solutions. All of this can encourage and impel you to continue this beautiful work of group animation that has been confided to you and which is not always easy.

As for the fifth petition of the **Our Father**, I do not think you will have trespasses for which to ask forgiveness, but, who knows? Sometimes in the holy places where we work for God and in God’s name, there can also be desires to be first or some jealousy that can offend, neutralize, counteract or even ruin apostolic work. These are times when the devil makes the most of a situation. Instead, create bonds of **friendship** that guarantee working together in solidarity now and in the future.

I also ask the Lord to deliver you from being led into certain temptations:

- the temptation to have the first place, of wanting to do things that are too impressive and extraordinary;
- the temptation to place more importance on methods and techniques, leaving aside the Holy Spirit and not giving him the place he deserves;
- the temptation (and this can also exist) of not putting at the Spirit’s disposal the many, useful modern means that he could use to spread his influence throughout the world;
- most of all, may the Spirit deliver you from the temptation of fear of failure and the temptation of discouragement. Everything that comes about is not according to our thoughts and desires, or even our efforts.

It is necessary to be convinced that effort is never lost and that sooner or later, it will bear fruit. As the gospel tells us, “some sow and others reap.” Sometimes we think we will have hundreds of people and we find ourselves with a very small group. This is not a sufficient reason to paralyze us. Who knows that perhaps from this small number, someone has been chosen by God to change the world. St. Vincent himself told us: “Three can do more than ten when Our Lord puts his hand to things” (Coste, Vol. 4, English ed., p. 122).

- Finally, may **God deliver you from all evil**, in all ways and in return may he give you all that is good: enthusiasm, joy, unity, fervor, etc.

I also invoke Mary, because through her intercession we receive all graces. The one who was chosen to be a privileged instrument in the Mystery of Salvation cannot be absent from our work, which has as its goal to free poor humanity from spiritual and material ills. May Mary and our Holy Founders accompany you throughout the course of your work.

Have a good Session!

Sister Juana Elizondo, D.C.
Paris, 8.VII.2002

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

Homily of the Superior General for the Opening of the Vincentian Month
(Paris, 7-26 July 2002)

Readings: Hosea 2:16-18, 21-22; Matthew 9:18-26

My brothers and sisters, it is good that we begin this time together with the Eucharist so that the word of God might fill our minds and hearts. This gathering is not just a meeting, but an opportunity for growth, an experience of the renewing presence of the Lord. In today's readings, the word of God lays before us two themes that are crucial for our growth and renewal. Let me say a brief word about each.

1. Today's first reading is very deceptive. It sounds almost like a peaceful love song: "Thus says the Lord: I will allure her. I will lead her into the desert and speak to her heart." But actually the prophet Hosea is speaking about his own people Israel and he has just called Israel a harlot, a prostitute, who decks herself out with jewels and covers herself with makeup and runs after every foreign god who passes by. Hosea is bitter because his own people have abandoned Yahweh, the God who loves them. And because Israel's worship of foreign gods included sexual rites, a fertility cult to Baal, Hosea expresses his anger by calling Israel a prostitute. I am sure that most of his hearers were not happy to be called by that name!

Yet precisely because of this sexual reference, Hosea has written some of the Old Testament's tenderest passages. Yahweh wants his beloved back, Hosea tells his audience. He describes Yahweh's longing for his people as the yearning of a husband for his bride. Hosea, perhaps more than any other prophet, assures us of the deep love that is at the root of God's covenanted union with his people. God is tender, understanding, unshakably faithful despite what at times seems like a tragic mismatch with a people that is sinful, straying, easily seduced by more immediately attractive partners.

God is utterly persevering, utterly attentive. Listen to these wonderful words of Hosea: "I will allure her. I will lead her into the desert and will speak to her heart."

I ask you to hear God speaking these words to us today. You begin three weeks of tiring work together. Even though we are right here in the heart of Paris, these weeks will be a desert for many of you: surely hot, dry too as you sit most of the time listening, reading, writing. There will probably be days, experience teaches us, when we wander around in circles in the

desert and begin to get tired and bored. But there will be other days when God's presence is clear and when he says "I am with you, I love you deeply. I espouse you and I want you to tell the whole world, especially the poor, that my love for them is unrelenting. Nothing can overcome it."

St. Vincent uses today's text from Hosea in two conferences, one to the Daughters of Charity (IX, 219) and one to the members of the Congregation of the Mission (XI, 94). On both occasions, Vincent was saying this: "We are about to begin a desert experience together. Listen, listen to the Lord. Listen, and let him speak." So I say to you as we begin this meeting: listen well. The Lord wants to speak to you in many ways and to teach you how to be a good Advisor ("Asesor") to our Vincentian groups. He wants to speak to you through the cries of the most abandoned, cries that all of you hear so often and can share with one another in these days. He speaks to you through one another. He speaks to you through the word that will be read each day in our liturgy. He speaks to you through the wider Church that is calling us in these days to be renewed and to plan for our mission in the third millennium.

This first reading is all about spirituality. The Lord wants to allure us. He wants to dig deeper roots in our hearts. He wants to speak to us directly and to teach us about advising, counseling, assisting others.

2. If the first reading is all about spirituality, then the second is all about mission. In fact, the two miracles in the gospel take place just before the great missionary discourse of Matthew's gospel. Jesus is showing his prospective missionaries, in action, what it means to minister. Jesus' heart is moved with pity, Matthew tells us in this chapter, at the sight of the crowds who are prostrate from exhaustion like sheep without a shepherd. So he heals this discouraged woman who has suffered from hemorrhages for twelve years and he says to her, "Courage, my daughter. Your faith has restored you to health." And then he raises up from the dead the daughter of the leader of the synagogue who said to him in faith: "Just lay your hand upon her and she will come back to life."

Notice the missionary Jesus. He is not daunted by sickness, nor by death. In fact, he tells us that his love breaks chains, it opens the doors of prisons, it sets captives free. It changes the hearts of sinners. Because of Jesus' love, those who weep, laugh; those who mourn, rejoice; those who hunger and thirst for justice have their fill.

A central focus of the mission of each of us here at this meeting is to advise, to counsel, to encourage, to animate our Vincentian lay groups. One of the great challenges of this meeting will be to concretize our mission, as did Jesus, so that it becomes not just a vague ideal but a

practical, effective healing sign of the presence of God among his people.

My brothers and sisters, these days together, like this Eucharist, are a communal celebration. We listen to the word of God together. We discern together. We formulate concrete goals together. And we offer one another mutual support in living out the mission that God has given us Advisors. I encourage you, therefore, to listen with confidence today and each day. Listen to the words of the prophet Hosea. This is God's word spoken to us: "I will allure you. I will lead you into the desert and speak to your heart. I will espouse you in fidelity and you shall know the Lord." That is what the Lord promises us in these days. We must allow him to speak to our hearts and to fan the missionary zeal that lies there into a flame, so that together we can make the worldwide Vincentian Family a powerful instrument in the service of the poor.

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.
8.VII.2002

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

Chronicle

by Bernard Schoepfer, C.M.
Province of Paris

An international gathering of Vincentian Family Advisors met together for the first time from 7-26 July 2002 at the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity in Paris (140 rue du Bac) (around 120 participants from 46 countries). Fr. Benjamín Romo, C.M., Vincentian Family delegate for the Superior General, invited us to this intensive session in order to provide better service to the poor and true collaboration among the various branches of our Family.

Sunday, 7 July

The 14th Sunday of Ordinary Time (Mt 11:25-30): *Father, Lord of heaven and earth, to you I offer praise for what you have hidden from the learned and the clever and have revealed to the merest children.*

The participants arrived from the four corners of the globe. All became acquainted with their respective Motherhouses and began to feel more at ease, in spite of some language difficulties. Many services had already been put into place for the smooth functioning of this gathering.

**FIRST WEEK:
FAITHFUL TO THE CHURCH, THE GOSPEL AND ST. VINCENT**

Monday, 8 July

At 8:30 a.m. we gathered in the beautiful Assembly Room of the Daughters of Charity Motherhouse. Each person took his/her place within the language group. The Spanish-speaking group was the largest. The three official languages (English, Spanish and French) were used during the entire month. This did not hinder the use of other languages such as Italian, Slovakian, Polish and many others.

After having greeted and thanked everyone for coming to this meeting, Sr. Juana Elizondo, Superioress General of the Daughters of Charity, encouraged us as we began our work with a meditation on the Our Father. She assured us of the prayers of all the Sisters of the Motherhouse (160 Sisters), especially the prayers of the Senior Sisters. She also invited us not to place more importance on the method

of our work, but to put on the Spirit of Christ as manifested in the Beatitudes. Following this we celebrated the Eucharist, presided by Fr. Robert Maloney, our Superior General. The first reading from the Book of Hosea reminded us that we are called into the desert. **God wants to allure us, entice us in order to give us his trust.** Following the liturgy we received information regarding the methods to be used and the objectives of the Session as well as some other practical bits of information. The morning ended and everyone went to the midday meal.

After a walk, a siesta or whatever one wanted to do, we reassembled again at 3:30 p.m. to continue our work. We sat according to group membership as Advisors within the Vincentian Family: **AIC, SSVP, JMV, AMM, MISEVI and others.** In a little over an hour we each quickly introduced ourselves. The Assembly Room video camera allowed us to see each person on the large front screen with each introduction. Around 5 p.m. we had our first sharings in small language groups and with each introduction we expressed our expectations of the Session. We closed the day by reciting the Vincentian Family Prayer.

Tuesday, 9 July

A new day began at 8:45 a.m. and already the room was resounding with “Buenos dias, good morning, and bonjour...” inviting us to take our places and begin with a prayer. Fr. Robert Maloney began the second day. Using a methodical and simple PowerPoint presentation, he invited us to reflect on “**Some Qualities of a Good Formator**” (as a Counsellor or Advisor). It was an interactive method: reflection — silence (with gentle music in the background) — questions. We were asked to make a personal and community reflection. Various questions encouraged us forward in this activity. After a break, we gathered in our work groups and took up the questions we received. The discussions were rich but sometimes difficult due to languages. The recitation of the Angelus concluded our morning.

Our sessions reconvened every day at 3:30 p.m. Today, was Fr. Jean Landousies, Superior of the Vincentian Motherhouse in Paris, who continued our morning reflection. He reminded us of the basic teachings about “**Laity in the Church Today**” and at the conclusion we were given some reflection questions. Here is one of them: “Called to holiness and called to mission, how is the union of this double aspect of the Christian vocation lived out?” We concluded at 6:30 p.m. with a little time before the evening meal.

Wednesday, 10 July

This day began with a prayer before giving the microphone to Fr. John Prager. His presentation invited us to reflect on “**St. Vincent de Paul and Lay Ministry.**” He gave us various aspects of Vincentian sensitivity marked by his

own missionary work in Panama. After spending some time in our work groups, Sr. André Menu, D.C. shared her missionary experience with the laity (AIC) while in the Cameroon. She provided us with some firm beliefs: center ourselves on Jesus Christ, accept setbacks, do not do for the laity but encourage them to do for themselves and take a secondary position. The afternoon was free and many took the opportunity to discover Paris.

Thursday, 11 July

Feast of St. Benedict, we are called to bring unity to prayer and work in order to live peacefully. Fr. John Prager offered us another presentation on **“To Serve the Poor Spiritually and Corporally.”** Let us remember this characteristic of our service: “We must enter into the world of the poor and listen to their concerns with respect and humility; without thinking that we have all the answers.” After a break, we once again gathered in small groups allowing us time to reflect on the words of Fr. John.

After the midday meal and some rest time we continued our work in language groups. Around 5 p.m. we returned to the Assembly Room for a plenary session. Each group shared the important points that resulted from its sharings. After this, some directions were given concerning Friday, a “special day of recollection.” Before leaving, we again recited the Vincentian Family Prayer.

Friday, 12 July

Today we welcomed Eva Villar and her husband Juan with their two little girls. Eva is a member of JMV (Vincentian Marian Youth) and is the President of MISEVI (Vincentian Lay Missionaries). Her experiences in Honduras and Bolivia enhanced her presentation. With the assistance of Fr. Felipe Nieto, CM, International Assistant of MISEVI, Eva explained **how to allow ourselves be evangelized by the poor.** Many principles guide this new way of living: a life marked by austerity, trust in God’s Divine Providence, an attitude of true sharing with the poor and active realism. It is only through experience that St. Vincent’s words “The poor are our lords and masters” are not reduced to a spiritual refrain. In the second part of our morning Sr. Sharon Richardt, DC, introduced the process of apostolic reflection. **It is expressing how we met God in our life this day and particularly in the persons we serve.** This method of reflection had been previously sent to us in preparation for the Vincentian Month. Around 11 a.m. we dispersed to have some time for private prayer and reflection on this topic.

To begin our afternoon meeting, we came together in our groups to share our apostolic reflections. When the sharings were finished, we discussed the important points we heard each other say and expressed this by a single word or phrase written on a large card to be shared with the rest of the Assembly during a prayer

service celebration. The celebration was simple, enriching and a source of enthusiasm. We shared a sign of peace with each other and then the “Minister of Culture and Leisure” asked us to return to the Assembly Room at 8:30 p.m. for an evening of entertainment. Dances, songs, pictures on the large screen, jokes and funny stories provided us with time to dream and laugh.

Saturday, 13 July

We began our last day of this week with a Marian Prayer accompanied by texts projected on the large screen. Today Fr. Corpus Delgado, CM, shared a short treatise on “**Marian Spirituality and the Vincentian Charism,**” an enriching doctrinal presentation. After some time for questions we rejoined our work groups. Here is the question we studied: *If Marian Spirituality consists in finding within Mary the inspiration to follow Christ, what are the characteristics of Marian catechesis and celebrations within our Vincentian Associations?*

In the afternoon, we gathered in the Assembly Room for an explanation of our last group activity of the week — determining three realities, three convictions and three commitments on the theme of the week — “**Faithful to the Gospel, the Church and St. Vincent.**” The group secretaries gave the responses to the Synthesis Commission in preparation for a Final Document concerning the Vincentian Month. We closed the day with a mediation on the Magnificat. Before leaving we viewed some digital photos on the large screen taken during the week, a remembrance of this first week’s experiences.

Sunday, 14 July

Free day: rest — relaxation — visits — National Holiday of France: parade on the Champs Elysées — Fireworks at 11:00 p.m. — 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Mt 13:1-23): *But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.*

SECOND WEEK: THE BEING AND WORK OF THE VINCENTIAN FAMILY

Monday, 15 July

Morning prayer invited us to welcome each person as a gift of God, then Sr. Margaret Barrett, DC, explained week two of our work. This week we would focus our energies in **knowing better the different branches of the Vincentian Family.** We would try to grasp the evolution of charity through the diverse experiences of our Spiritual Family. We welcomed the Presidents and their closest collaborators

of the various branches: AIC, SSVP, JMV, AMM, MISEVI. After some practical information we began the topic of the day. Professor Asdrúbal J. Baptista, originally from Venezuela, Doctor of Law and Economics, led us in the theme of the day: **“The Commitment of the Laity in the World and the Church Today.”** A presentation in two parts, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon, led us along the pathway of a description and analysis of the complex universe of economics and the relationship between rich and poor countries. “No generation has had an easy time of living. Accepting this allows a spirit of peace to act.” The temporal and spiritual orders meet within action and hope. In Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life, we find the key to help us read history. Our commitment must be focused in two areas: social and personal. During our group work sharings on the social teachings of the Church and the question and answer time in the plenary session, each participant was able to understand the elements of analysis and the principles given during the presentation. In the evening, Sr. Juana Elizondo, DC, gave a presentation on the Company of the Daughters of Charity throughout the world at the beginning of the 21st century.

Tuesday, 16 July

“Awake, Latin America, a new day is shining on your mountain tops,” this refrain encouraged us to pray for the women and men of our day, especially the people of Latin America. Patricia de Nava, International President of the AIC, led our day. She provided us with our first conviction: **“If we are here, it is because we believe that we must be participants in changing the living conditions of the poor.”** We can already affirm that behind every good volunteer there is a good Advisor. From the time of St. Vincent to our day, the manner of exercising “charity” continues to evolve. What is lasting is the experience of the poor. We must move from handouts to the poor to participation of the poor. This is the pathway of self-advancement and the dynamism of true solidarity. We must renounce our complaisant and paternalistic attitudes towards the lowly. After a time for questions and answers and a break, we were shown a process for understanding this evolution of charity. “Working in the Form of Projects” was displayed on the large screen and then explained. The stages of the project were classified according to an order established by the service experience in order to succeed in transforming the poverty situation. Evaluating the project is an essential step of the process.

We were in our work groups for the afternoon. We used a process entitled “Debono’s Hat” to facilitate our work and the ensuing results. Three concerns, three expectations and three suggestions from the perspective of an Advisor were then shared in the Assembly Room. Let us recall this additional remark from Patricia de Nava: **“We do not work with the poor because we are honorable but because they deserve our assistance. We owe them a debt of justice.”**

Around 5:30 p.m., Sr. Marie-Geneviève Roux, DC, guided us on a tour of our spiritual sources embodied within Louise de Marillac, Vincent de Paul and Frederick Ozanam. By way of a slide presentation she described the origins of the “Vincentian tree” in Paris. Tomorrow we would make a pilgrimage to places of the Founders of the Vincentian Family. Each person received a small booklet with additional information.

Wednesday, 17 July

A beautiful day was forecast and the sun was shining on Paris. The route we took was filled with Family memories. The prior evening, Sr. Marie-Geneviève told us that **the spiritual life enters through our eyes, ears and even our feet!** The face of Paris has completely changed in three centuries — with the exception of a few Churches where we stopped. We tried to relive in our imaginations the events that took place wherever we stopped. It was during “the time of the horse-drawn carriages” that already made traffic difficult enough! From place to place we took time to discover, remember and pray. This pilgrimage was a “return to the sources”... At Saint Nicholas des Champs, we recalled the personal grace that Louise de Marillac called “the grace of Pentecost” (4 June 1623). We read St. Louise’s account of this “interior light.” Like Louise, we asked God to enlighten us in order to accomplish his will.

In the afternoon we headed to Clichy. The commentaries provided by our guides helped us to know the capital and the sun brightened the splendor of Paris. At 4 p.m. we celebrated the Eucharist at the Church of Clichy. St. Vincent reconstructed the little church that still exists today and is connected to the current large parish church of Saint Vincent de Paul. Within his journey towards the poor, Monsieur Vincent had, here in this place, the joy of experiencing that living with a people is a source of development for every vocation. It was on 2 May 1612 that Monsieur Vincent arrived as pastor of Clichy. It was the first time in 15 years that he found himself among the honest and simple people of the country. He was 31 years of age! Following Christ, in the way of St. Vincent, we asked God our Father in the Eucharist, to grant us perseverance, courage and patience in our encounters with life’s wounded. Upon leaving, we were given cards reminding us of the events here. We headed back on the road and the atmosphere on the bus was joyful, with songs along the way. We made one last stop along the Esplanade of the Trocadéro where we admired the Eiffel Tower and the Champ de Mars. It was magnificent!

Thursday, 18 July

The beautiful melody of a Brazilian song opened the day. After a moment of reflection, we prefaced the day’s work with information regarding the end of this second week. Today, we would take the time to become acquainted with the

foundations, spirit, objectives and organization of the different branches of the Vincentian Family. Each representative of the various branches (AIC, SSVP, JMV, AMM, MISEVI) shared for 20 minutes, in his/her own way, the composition of his/her respective Association. It was evident that all desire to serve the poor and that all desire to collaborate. Yet, like the saying of a modern-day theologian, “truth is a symphony,” we could paraphrase this in saying that “charity, with the many agents of the Vincentian Family, can become a beautiful symphony.” The harmony is comprised of many sounds: “The AIC wishes to be a transformative force in society toward and with women of the entire world; but also a critical force giving value to their dignity.” “In following Frederick Ozanam, we desire to enfold the world in a network of charity, in prayer, action and thought.” “An experience for and with young people with a view to creating places to live, share and receive education, choosing Mary as a companion for the journey.” “Those who wear the Miraculous Medal are already a member of the AMM. Nothing is ready yet; everything is just beginning to be planned. We are developing a way of living charity through communication, formation and collaboration.” “MISEVI calls itself the youngest member of the Family. The missionary experience among young people is a special orientation for service with and for the most deprived.” At midday we prayed the Angelus in Portuguese.

Around 3 p.m., we gathered in the garden of the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity for a group photo. This was followed by a plenary session of questions and answers with the Presidents of the Family Associations. Fr. Romo gave God thanks for this meeting and, in the name of Fr. Maloney, extended his gratitude to the international leadership for their active presence: “As Advisors, you form us and we thank you.”

At 5 p.m. we celebrated the Eucharist in the Chapel of the Rue du Bac. We recalled the first apparition of the Virgin Mary to Catherine Labouré, the night of 18-19 July 1830. Fr. McCullagh, CM, invited us to listen to the sounds of silence. Silence guides us towards the contemplation we need in order to listen to the new sounds and new voices in a climate of contemplative silence. **“Too often we ask for what we want, but not often enough for what God wants,”** St. Catherine said to a companion.

During an evening celebration, the community of the Daughters of Charity of the Motherhouse invited us to pray with Mary and like Catherine. The Chapel was full and the pilgrims remained in silence for a long time. “Yes, Mary, I want to sing this prayer for you. I want to present to you the cries of all my brothers and sisters.”

Friday, 19 July

“We ask the Lord of the harvest to send laborers into his harvest.” It was through these words that we directed our prayer to God. We are able to follow Jesus Christ with our differences, our weaknesses and our talents. Christ is the rule of the mission. A beautiful Lebanese song concluded our morning prayer. **“Unifying Elements of the Vincentian Family”** was the morning presentation. The Vincentian spirit has developed further than our Founders could have ever imagined. It is not used up or exhausted within any branch of our Family. It is a combination of unity and diversity. Fr. Romo provided us with thoughts for reflection in order to better achieve unity without falling into uniformity. The Vincentian spirit cannot be bound into a theory. Group work then continued this simple yet enlightening presentation. We gathered in regional or country groups to share our ways of collaborating among the various branches of the Vincentian Family.

The afternoon continued with Sr. Elisabeth Charpy, DC. She shared on one of the aspects of Louise de Marillac’s life: **“Louise de Marillac: Animator of the Confraternities of Charity.”** Three qualities of being an animator came out of the presentation: attentive listening, respect for others and adequate competency. But some stumbling blocks must be noted as well: activism and discouragement. Again, we had sharing within our groups to suggest ways to better animate the groups and teams we accompany. During the evening we took some time to rejoice a bit. The air was filled with “peals of laughter.” The “Cultural Minister,” Fr. Diego Luis Vásquez, CM, transformed himself into a eminent professor!

Saturday, 20 July

The Polish, Slovakian, Slovenian and Ukrainian languages began our morning prayer. We prayed with Our Lady. The Wedding Feast at Cana and a song to the “Black” Madonna formed our time of reflection. We need to bless others more and there will be more peace throughout our world. Fr. Mikhaylo Talapkanych, CM, shared a Ukrainian proverb that states, “Whenever a priest gives a blessing, all hell trembles!” Fr. Orlando Escobar, CM, then presented the **Web Site** (www.famvin.org). He made us aware that this is a means of service of the poor. Through this information web we can create local pages, send information and formation documents, and create links between local pages. We have there a summary of what is and what can be of the Vincentian Family. The challenge is to give access to this means of networking to the greatest number of people (rich and poor alike). Pope John Paul II, in his message for the 2002 World Day of Communications asks us: *The Internet causes billions of images to appear on millions of computer monitors around the planet. From this galaxy of sight and sound will the face of Christ emerge and the voice of Christ be heard?* A projection of numerous photos of our second week on the large screen helped us marvel at the richness of our Family life. The work groups were reformulated for a final sharing among members of the same branch of the Vincentian Family: three realities, three

convictions and three commitments to improve the work of our Family were studied.

Sunday, 21 July

A day filled with sunshine — Free day — 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Mt 13:24-43): *The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field....*

THIRD WEEK: THE ROLE OF THE ADVISOR

Monday, 22 July

We are now coming to the final stretch. During this third week of the Vincentian Month, we studied the role of the Advisor. We began with a prayer. A Hindi song centered our praise: “The Lord comes to dwell with us. Let us bring flowers to our worthy guest. Let us sing songs of praise.” Sr. Margaret Barrett was delighted with this exceptional session: **a way of a real promotion of the Vincentian charism has been proclaimed.** In a simple and clear teaching method, Fr. José Antonio Ubillús, CM, Assistant General, provided us with indicators in order to exercise **our role as advisor in the Vincentian Family groups.** Having a spirit of John the Baptist is the true attitude for all advisors: “He must increase; and I must decrease” (Jn 3:30). Jesus’ teachings, as advisor of the 12, open our hearts and minds in accomplishing the “ministry of accompaniment.” We had a break to take advantage of the sunshine and quench our thirst, then we returned to our work groups. Meeting as advisors of the same branch, we shared the realities, difficulties and suggestions inherent in our responsibilities.

It is beautiful and warm in Paris but we must continue our work. Edurne Urdampilleta, member of the JMV International Council, assisted us in reflecting upon **“The Advisor and the Spiritual Life.”** The essential point is to develop faith in Jesus Christ and not in the Advisor. After an analysis of our information age and its repercussions on people’s lives, various components of discernment and accompaniment were presented. Once again we came together in groups to discuss the Advisor’s function in the spiritual life of the group and the individuals in the group. In a spirit of joy, we departed to our respective Motherhouses for the evening meal. For many, the evening was a time of recuperation, as yesterday many went sightseeing and fatigue was beginning to set in.

Tuesday, 23 July

In union with the Church liturgy, we celebrated the feast of Saint Bridget, Co-patron of Europe. After some announcements, we began our morning with a reflection on **“The Advisor and Formation.”** Here are a few elements given by Edurne Urdampilleta regarding the role of the Advisor: assure the implementation of a good formation program, encourage the animators, help to develop personal life plans, and accompany the team process. In order to deepen our understanding of the topic, we shared, within our groups, the Advisor’s function relative to the holistic formation of the members.

The afternoon session opened with a brief presentation of the Sisters of Charity of Strasbourg. Sr. Denise Baumann, SC, also introduced us to the Federation of 11 German-speaking Congregations living and working in the Vincentian Spirit. This was followed by a presentation from Fr. Jaime Corera, CM, International Spiritual Advisor of SSVP: **“The Advisor and the Apostolic Mission of Lay Vincentians.”** This responsibility of accompaniment and animation requires the ability to listen and be attentive in regard to those who have been confided to us. Note these closing words of the presentation: *The Advisor should also be open to learn how to allow him/herself be called by the members of the Vincentian institution or group being accompanied.* Around 6 p.m. the various representatives of the Vincentian Family were available for questions that had been previously deposited in a box. After this simple and concrete exchange, we closed with a prayer and wished everyone a good evening.

Wednesday, 24 July

We are already giving thanks for this Vincentian Month. It was through the “Our Father” that we concluded our thanksgiving. Some announcements were shared in order to accomplish the closing work. Then Fr. Alberto Vernaschi, CM, presented the most important points of **“Vincentian Family Associations: Juridical and Canonical Dimensions.”** He, simply and accurately, explained the statutes of the Associations in relationship to the Church. The statutes are a means and not an end in themselves. The categories of Public and Private Associations have their usefulness for Church unity and apostolic fruitfulness.

Today was our last day for sharing with the different branches of the Vincentian Family. Each group was able ask questions on points from the presentations that had surfaced or not surfaced. Alas! Yes, the session was nearing the end. Tomorrow would be another time of enrichment. To close the day, Fr. Roberto Lovera, CM, shared the **financial accounts of the Vincentian Month with us.** The costs, the financial assistance received, the numerous free services provided and the cost per participant were the topics of this financial summary. We thanked Fr. Lovera for this presentation and for his assistance. He was also the official photographer of the Session, but tonight, Br. John Gaven, CM, had a surprise for him — we needed a photo of our “Father Treasurer!”

Thursday, 25 July

We wished our Spanish Brothers and Sisters a happy feast on this day of St. James. The participants from the United States invited us to pray with Louise de Marillac: “Lord, grant me the grace to imitate your way of living and acting. Teach me to always have great esteem for my neighbor.” We were almost at the end of our Vincentian Month. It was time to review our three-week experience of enthusiasm and renewal in order to envision our commitments. Fr. Romo guided us in this work: **“How to Communicate the Lived Experience in One’s Own Country.”** From this question, we were to bring forth the most important elements to be communicated within our respective countries. As Fr. Maloney remarked to us at the beginning of the Session: “A good formator is someone who communicates his/her experience.” A phrase from St. Vincent parallels this: “It is not enough to love God if my neighbor does not love God.” The richness of the Vincentian spirit not only helps us to live our vocation but also to allow others to participate in it. In order to review these days of formation, we were grouped by country for the first work activity and then by continent for the second. At the end of the morning we shared our thoughts in a plenary session. A suggestion was made to send a letter of thanksgiving and encouragement to the various leaders and their councillors in the name of all the participants in order to deepen together our lives in the Vincentian Family. A second suggestion was to develop a meeting such as this on our own level (continent, country, region) for a week’s duration, for example. Before leaving for the midday meal we prayed the Angelus in English.

This was the last afternoon of Session work. It was also the first time we heard Fr. Gherardo Armani, CM, speak about the Vincentian Family Project **“The Globalization of Charity: The Fight Against Hunger”** that has been proposed throughout the world since 27 September 2001, and of which there are more than 100 projects in progress. The presentation of this project gave us a view of this activity against hunger on the outskirts of Kinshasa with the Vincentian Family of Italy and the Congo. After the break we returned to our work groups. Our afternoon work consisted of studying the draft of the Vincentian Month’s Final Synthesis and evaluating the last three weeks.

Friday, 26 July

It was in the quiet that God’s dream for each of us took shape. Here, at the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity, the Virgin Mary welcomed us during the three-week Session. Thank you for this graced time! We thanked God in our prayers for his love and the work accomplished. Everything has an ending, even the Vincentian Month. This last gathering in the Assembly Room allowed us the time to become familiar with the draft of the **Final Synthesis**. It will be shared with all the Session participants and with the different leaders of the Vincentian

Family. The entire document was displayed on the large screen and the Assembly became aware of the great amount of work accomplished by the Synthesis Commission. We extended our gratitude to its members. Following this began a series of thank you's for the overall smooth running of the meeting. The various services received a round of applause. A special "thanks" was given to the 14 translators for the different languages represented at the Session and to Sr. Sharon Richardt for her role as "facilitator." And, infinite gratitude was extended to each member of the Preparatory Commission by the Assembly: "Words cannot express all that you have done for us over the past two years."

After a few last announcements we all went over to St. Vincent's Chapel at Rue de Sèvres for the Eucharistic Celebration, presided by Fr. Romo. Let us recall these words from the homily: *Jesus and St. Vincent invite us to incarnate this attitude of the Good Samaritan. In our service of the laity, we are called not only to "bend down" and care for the wounded but also to help others, the laity, care for the wounded. It is for us to show one another the journey of service.* A beautiful offertory procession, with a background of African music, moved us to a moment of thanksgiving for all the gifts received during the Vincentian Month. It was with greetings, "thanks" and peals of laughter that we dispersed to take up once again our everyday lives and now live out our role as Advisors in the Vincentian Family with patience, perseverance and certainly ... a good dose of humor!

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

Laity in the Church Today

by Jean Landousies, C.M.
Province of Paris
9.VII.2002

Introduction

The title of this presentation covers a vast area: “*Laity in the Church Today.*” And yet the diversity of your origins, your commitments, your situations and your local options make the task all the more difficult! I also had to choose from among the themes for our reflection. I had to keep the topic fairly broad hoping that your group work would allow you to share your experiences. Therefore I will propose some overviews that seem important for the vocation and mission of the laity in today’s world and Church development. I will develop my remarks around five points:

1. Laity in the Church-Communion
2. Laity impassioned for humankind: a call to proclaim the Gospel to the poor
3. Laity impassioned for God: a call to holiness
4. Working with the Church, collaborating with people of goodwill
5. The need for formation

Before starting our reflection, I would like to stress two points that seem important to bear in mind during our discussions:

The first is the interest Vincent showed for the place of the laity in the mission of the Church. We recall that the first of his foundations was that of the Charities. He brought the laity together in order to serve the poor. This theme will be taken up again later. The second point is the concern we should have, not only for the “authorized” Vincentian laity, but also for all laity throughout the world who, explicitly or not, lay claim to Vincent de Paul, and who may have no intent of becoming a constituted branch of the Vincentian Family. They too, alone or with others, serve the poor.

1. Laity in the Church-Communion

1.1. What Church? First, I invite you to reflect, for a moment, on the Church in which the baptized live out their vocation.

Since Vatican II, reflection on Church union has been widely developed. We find ourselves at the heart of the mystery of the Church: a Church coming from a Triune God, that is a God who is unity himself. A Church whose members must

live in union with this God who calls them and sends them, a communion with God where union among members ensues. Finally, as a result of what is at the deepest part of her being, this Church received the mission to strive towards union of all peoples among themselves and with God.

Three important images express and complete this mystery of Church union: the images of the Church as the People of God, the Body of Christ and Temple of the Spirit.

a. Church as the People of God: The Church is a people that comes from God, lives through God and belongs to God. What is essential is being together as Christians above any distinction of function, services or ministries. Naturally, this does not exclude the necessity that the people of God, like everyone, has leaders taken from among its members. But we need to go a little further for there is a great risk that these people will close in on themselves and exclude those who are not part of the group. This is what we could call the “sectarian” risk. The Church is a people sent on mission with and by the Holy Spirit. A people open to all the world, inviting them to form together the one People of God. We know well the beautiful passage from *Lumen Gentium*, often quoted in the teaching of the Magisterium: “... the Church, in Christ, is in the nature of sacrament — a sign and an instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all peoples” (*LG* 1).

b. The Church as the Body of Christ: These last few years perhaps, we have spoken of the Church more often as the “People of God,” undoubtedly to avoid having a pyramidal view of the Church. Yet, the image of “the people” does not completely describe the mystery of the Church. It must be articulated through other images, first through this essential image of the Church as the Body of Christ. This image expresses the profound unity of the Church with Christ and, at the same time, her dependence in his regard, he who is head of the body. This image also shows the unity and diversity of the Church. All are members of the Church but not all have the same function (cf. Saint Paul, 1 Cor 12:12-30). Within the Church there are diversity and complementarity of vocations and lifestyles, ministries, charisms and responsibilities. Moreover, this image of the Body is important in order to understand the mission. For if the body is what allows us to enter into relationship with others, the Church, as the Body of Christ allows Christ to concretely enter into relationship with men and women of all time and all cultures.

c. The Church as the Temple of the Spirit: Lastly, the third image, aligned with the two preceding images, is that of the Church as Temple of the Spirit. It is this same Spirit that is the dynamic principle for the variety and unity of the Church and within the Church. It is the Spirit of communion, union that gathers the Church in all the diversity of her members and who creates one people and

one Body. The Church is the Temple of the Spirit because the Church is constructed and built by the Holy Spirit while at the same time being constructed and built by Christians. The Spirit is the source of all charisms, gifts confided to all Christians for the benefit of the Church and her mission. This also signifies that while all the baptized have received the Holy Spirit, they all have the right to speak within the Church and the right to be heard. This can be referred to what is called “*sensus fidei*,” that is, the supernatural sense of faith that belongs to the entire people (cf. *LG* 12).

If there is time, we should also mention here the common priesthood of the faithful that is not a priesthood of the laity but that of all the members of the Church, a common priesthood given to all through the Holy Spirit (cf. *LG* 10).

1.2. For which laity? It is within this Church communion, Body of Christ, Temple of the Spirit and People of God that I would like to situate the vocation and mission of the laity. Let us recall what Vatican II states in *Lumen Gentium*: “The term ‘laity’ is here understood to mean [...] the faithful who by Baptism are incorporated into Christ, are placed in the people of God, and in their own way share the priestly, prophetic and royal office of Christ, and to the best of their ability carry on the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world” (*LG* 31). The laity are therefore not defined in relation to priests or religious. They are first of all baptized and who, by their baptism, are entitled to participate in the life and mission of the Church. They are joined with Christ and thereby live life in the Spirit. In other respects, they live in communion with one another forming one same body and one same people. Their mission takes place in the Church and in the world. Note well in the above passage that the laity are not only defined by their presence in the world. They too are responsible for the life of the Church and participate in the Church’s mission.

a. Lay commitment to the world: This aspect is greatly developed in the Vatican II texts and those following Vatican II. I will return to this in a moment. We already stated that the lay apostolic vocation does not come from a “mandate” bestowed by the bishop. It is founded on their baptism and confirmation. The texts clearly show that evangelization, the primary mission of the Church, is not only proclaiming the gospel in a direct sense (preaching, catechesis, etc.), it is also in transforming the world to be more in conformity with the gospel. There is also an apostolate that consists of evangelizing the realities of the world by a life of witness and through the word.

b. Lay commitment to the Church: Since Vatican II there has been a considerable renewal in this area. The place of the laity in the Church is not reduced to passive assistance nor to liturgical service, in other respects limited enough. Think about the development of lay participation in the pastoral responsibilities within the life of the Church community from the liturgy to

transmitting the faith, catechesis, or their contribution to the various pastoral services and structures. Each region has its own ways of allowing the laity to be active in the life of the Church, according to needs. But in a general sense we note, for example, that the creation of councils and synods allow the laity not only to develop “activities” but also to effectively feel more responsible for the mission of the Church, responsible as lay persons, in union with bishops and priests. In an attempt to avoid a clericalization of the laity, it is necessary for them to participate in the internal life of the Church by the fact of their baptism and confirmation.

In summary, we must return to the words of John Paul II in the apostolic letter *Christifideles Laici*: “The lay faithful, precisely because they are members of the Church, have the vocation and mission of proclaiming the Gospel: they are prepared for this work by the sacraments of Christian initiation and by the gifts of the Holy Spirit” (33). By the fact of their baptism and confirmation, the laity are therefore fully committed in the mission of the Church. I would now like to develop this a bit further.

2. A passion for humanity: laity called to proclaim the gospel to the poor.

Now I would like to be more specific about the position of the laity in the mission of the Church and especially through their service to society.

The primary lay mission that I will stress first is that they must witness, with their entire life, that faith in Jesus Christ is the fundamental response to the questions and hopes of humanity and society. Committing themselves within the various life sectors in the world, they concretely announce this Good News, that is, salvation in Jesus Christ. It is an essential responsibility confided to the laity in union with all the other members of the People of God. I will not go into the diverse lay missionary commitments, nor the need for an analysis of the human situations and changes of society. You are aware of these within your own countries.

2.1. But within these areas, it seems to me that we Vincentians must be particularly concerned to recall, time and time again, that the laity **have a particular vocation to promote the dignity of all persons** — especially the poorest and the weakest.

A privileged area linked to a commitment in favor of human dignity is being **present in places of poverty and suffering**: assisting the sick, persons with disabilities, the elderly, the sick in the end stages of their illness, and victims of new illnesses, (AIDS and others). Christians who get involved by meeting and understanding people are essential expressions of the love and mercy of Christ and of his Church in regard to those who are experiencing hardships. The heart

of the evangelical message is this Good News: humanity is loved by God! The words and life of each Christian must be a clear sign. The same applies for all that touches the **area of charity and solidarity**, participation in charitable movements of the apostolate or in education, so as to be a more just society where each person finds his or her place and can live in dignity. We Vincentians, especially, must not forget that fighting for justice is an essential element of the mission of the Church — all of this in parishes, various communities, neighborhoods and towns, in collaboration with others with other ways of thinking who direct support or solidarity services.

Another area important for the laity in which to invest themselves is in promoting and defending **respect for life**. This encompasses many areas and it often poses many difficult questions but it must not be abandoned. I am thinking especially of the challenges of bioethical questions.

The diversity of commitments, which I will not go further into here, must allow reaching all the individual and collective dimensions of human existence — from personal and family problems to problems concerning culture, peace and politics, etc. or the need to have a clear understanding of the dignity of work, seen as the fulfillment of the person and the accomplishment of his/her vocation.

2.2. Moreover, generally speaking, in order to come to an authentic change in human relationships and the life of society, it seems important that lay movements be places of **education and support** for those who have political, financial and social responsibilities so as to enable them to accomplish their tasks with integrity, being concerned to give priority for the good of the people and being aware of the human impact of their choices.

2.3. Now, to conclude this point, allow me to reflect upon two dimensions of these commitments that seem essential for the mission today: the quality of the meetings and the universality of the outlook. This is, moreover, what we find widely expressed by Vincent de Paul.

First, the **importance and quality of meetings**. This is true for all Christian life, but I would like to stress this in the life of today's laity, because often the temptation is to keep to the quality of the doing, of the intellectual content or material of a gathering, of a meeting, of an action, etc. For us, there is certainly something to be deepened in order to live according to the spirit of Vincent de Paul. The laity are the first in line to be able to go “naturally” and in all areas, to meet others in the name of Christ, without being exclusive; to develop encounters for listening to others, helping them grow, taking them seriously, respecting their dignity so that they can fully develop their own human and spiritual vocation. In this perspective, I would also like to add that it is urgent that in our reactions, for our own view of peoples and situations, we have integrated important elements

too such as ecumenical dialogue or interreligious dialogue. Today, these are places of encounters, and therefore of proclaiming the gospel, that we can no longer ignore. If so many misunderstandings exist and unfortunately develop today among people of different religions, it is often due to a lack of true knowledge and a lack of mutual respect for differences.

All of this leads us **to foster universality**, all the more important in our social life as we find ourselves within a context of globalization. You will have occasion to come back to this theme. More and more, in many countries, we are finding the presence of very diverse populations because of their social, cultural or religious origins. We can add to this the rapid development of communication, tourism, etc. It is no longer possible to live tucked away in one's traditional environment. We also know that the discovery of this widening of horizons can give rise to fears with often disastrous results. Here the laity certainly have an unlimited field open to the missionary heart and spirit.

3. Passion for God: laity called to holiness

Now I would like to suggest taking another step in placing the vocation of the laity to the mission in the perspective of a call to holiness, which is, in a way, a result of baptism.

The vocation of the laity in the Church is not pure activism, in the same way that "spiritual things" are not only for priests and men and women religious. The Christian experience of the laity is not reduced to encountering humanity. It takes place at the same time within an intimate encounter with God. The spiritual experience of Vincent de Paul is particularly enlightening on this subject. His experience with Christ cannot be separated from his experience with the poor. In looking for one he found the other, in discovering the poor he met Christ, and the more he discovered Christ in his mystery, the more he was pushed to go to meet the poor, to live with them what he had discovered. The spiritual life that each baptized person is called to develop is not a running away from the world! It is essential to come back to the universal call addressed to all and therefore to each faithful lay person, for this call implants its roots in baptism and is strengthened by the other sacraments. The baptized must therefore be a passionate person of God, steadily advancing on the road of evangelical renewal.

3.1. The response to the call to holiness is not an abstract path, lost in the clouds. It is not a far-off and trivial desire. It is a true **searching for the perfection of being**, the fulfillment of the total person, such as God created him/her, such as God desires to see him/her fully develop. It is the search for true goodness for oneself, and also with and for others in a specific way; a goodness, a perfection that is found in authentic union with God and our brothers and sisters. Therefore it is something very concrete that takes a lifetime and

concerns all areas of life, not only what we strictly call spiritual life. In the search for holiness, the Christian want to find his/her full development, his/her full accomplishment in conformity to Christ. The road is not easy. But it is essential to offer it as the heart of the Christian vocation from which all the rest follows, and to show that the journey on this path is not alone but in solidarity, with Christ and with other baptized persons.

3.2. This lay vocation to holiness is expressed in a particular way in the laity's insertion within temporal realities and their participation in the world's activities. This signifies that **the vocation to holiness is intimately linked to the vocation to the mission.** It is everyday life, with all its commitments, in particular in service to others in the Church and in the world, that must become an occasion of union with God and accomplishing God's will. In this way the laity contribute to the building up of the Kingdom of God. In summary, as John Paul II reminds us in his apostolic letter at the close of the Great Jubilee year, to put pastoral life under the sign of holiness is a choice of great consequence. "It implies the conviction that, since Baptism is a true entry into the holiness of God through incorporation into Christ and the indwelling of God's Spirit, it would be a contradiction to settle for a life of mediocrity, marked by a minimalist ethic and a shallow religiosity" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 31).

4. In a pluralistic society: the need for a work within the Church and collaboration with men and women of good will

In our society it is necessary take into account the plurality that is being expressed more and more and its consequences for the lay mission. It seems to me that the role of accompaniment of the different groups and movements has great importance within this area.

4.1. In order to do this, it must first be shown that **the Church herself is pluralistic.** As we have already stated, Church unity is a unity of communion among different expressed charisms as modeled in the image of the Trinity. It is a richness that shows both the diversity of gifts of the Spirit and that the Church bears within herself the possibility of bringing together all lived human situations in order to proclaim the gospel and give authentic witness.

4.2. **No one, nor any ecclesial group can claim to completely possess this wealth of gifts of the Spirit** that shows the richness and diversity of the gospel. Moreover, it is the gospel in its totality that must be transmitted to the men and women of today. Within this is the expression of an important reality for the life of the Church. Being faithful to the gospel and proclaiming it requires that an authentic communion be lived, not only at the level of the Creed, but in the missionary expression itself. The demands that ensue are of two classifications:

within our Catholic communities themselves, and on the other part, within the search for Christian unity.

To be more specific, it is an essential point within the lay mission. It is its collective, communal, or more simply stated, ecclesial dimension. **The temptation of many groups is to withdraw into themselves!** Many need to have an awareness that the mission they have received, either individually or as a group, is **a mission confided by Christ to his Church** and that the different groups that exist within the Church are the expression of the diversity of charisms. Certainly, for what concerns us presently, it is legitimate to give credence to what we call the Vincentian Family. But this must lead us to a deepening and growth of the Vincentian charism. Already among ourselves, within this Family, we can sense the richness of the different facets of this charism. It is this whole that we must bring to the unique mission of the Church. The closing in on oneself of some ecclesial communities or groups can only lead to an impoverishment of the Church and ultimately an impoverishment of these groups, which will end by dying out or breaking off from the living tree of the Church to enclose themselves in sectarian practices. We are to build a fraternal Church, a community of believers but also a community or communion of communities, an open Church, where each one has his or her place recognized by others, a Church where all are able to collaborate with their differences. We also find there what also should be lived in societies tempted by individualism. By our Vincentian charism, we have the responsibility of **contributing towards making the world a place of sharing and community**, a place of living together well, sincerely open towards others in respecting true differences that are mutually enriching and not rigid boundaries to maintain.

4.3. This leads us to take another step, to broaden our horizons. This is what I will call **the need for a common commitment with people of good will**. The laity find themselves at the heart of these pluralistic societies where a multitude of religious or non-religious, cultural or other trends are expressed. They find themselves directly confronted by these trends in their family life, neighborhood, work, leisure, etc. There, in multiple ways, lies their apostolic commitment. Therefore it is necessary to expose them to all the areas of “religion” or culture that they are most likely to meet. Too often they are not prepared for this — priests are often in the same situation — and it seems important to me that, faced with all the current excesses and manipulation of religions, the laity should be encouraged to meet, work together, and serve society with all people of good will, beyond religious and ideological distinctions. I feel that it is not only in living, one next to the other, that true knowledge or reciprocal appreciation comes about, but from the everyday sharing of life, of a common commitment to the progress of peoples and societies.

5. Lay formation

I am coming to my final point which certainly has great importance for you first of all, as accompaniers, but especially in order to strengthen the present vocation and mission of the laity and to assure their future. It is the question of formation.

If we want laity who are mature, aware of their responsibilities within the Church and society, and if we want to broaden the horizon of evangelization, then we must **give the laity a solid human and spiritual formation**. It is about helping them discover and live their vocation, developing a structure that gives unity to their lives. In today's world, which has become complex and demanding, it is essential that Christians, especially those who are involved in movements, be competent, not only materially or technically competent but also, and perhaps above all, spiritually competent in order that the gospel be proclaimed authentically and boldly. Competency in service is a form of respect for the poor. It is essential that the laity be formed to Christian reflection regarding the life and apostolate situations which present themselves. We all know that it is important to have a heart but that is not always enough. At the same time one must also use reason. This is particularly true in the practice of charity, of works of charity where one is often tempted to speak or act purely on emotion.

Without wanting to limit formation to these aspects, I would like to stress the importance of formation in the **social doctrine of the Church** for us Vincentians. It is up to us to be particularly sensitive if we want to put forth a vision of humanity and society that is in keeping with fundamental human values and it is up to us to work to promote respect for the inviolable dignity of all persons, beginning with the poorest and weakest of our society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to take a passage from John Paul II's Apostolic Letter addressed to the Church at the close of the Great Jubilee year 2000, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*: "At the beginning of this new century, our steps must quicken as we travel the highways of the world. Many are the paths on which each one of us and each of our Churches must travel, but there is no distance between those who are united in the same communion, the communion which is daily nourished at the table of the Eucharistic Bread and the Word of Life" (58).

The vocation and mission of the laity in the Church and in the world carries demands as strong as those of other ecclesial vocations. These are not "third-rate" vocations. As accompaniers, we have a special responsibility not only to the groups we accompany, but even more so to the Church, so that all baptized persons become keenly aware of the dignity of their vocation and the consequences that flow from it in their personal and ecclesial life.

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

St. Vincent de Paul and Lay Ministry

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One of the biggest challenges facing the Catholic Church at the beginning of the new millennium is the situation of the laity and lay ministry. Great advances have been made since Vatican II. But, there has been resistance to lay participation in ministry and decision-making in the Church. The Holy See has given conflicting signals about the role of lay ministers. There are many questions being raised about lay ministry by pastors, theologians and the lay men and women themselves. Many of these questions touch the Vincentian Family and will affect the way we collaborate in the future.

So, it is a legitimate question at the beginning of this presentation to ask: why go back to the 17th century? We cannot expect St. Vincent to have all of the answers for the problems of today. There are some similarities between the post-Tridentine Church which Vincent knew and the post-Vatican II Church that is our own. But, there are also many differences. It is too simplistic to say: “Vincent did this, therefore we will do the same.”

Whenever we look back to the past for insight into present-day realities there is a danger of creating something that never existed. That is particularly true for the topic of today’s conference because St. Vincent never gives a systematic presentation of his ideas on lay ministry. It is easy enough to avoid the data which contradicts my point of view and create a St. Vincent as I wish him to be, rather than as he was. I have tried to keep that in mind with this presentation.

I think St. Vincent is a starting point. He lived the Vincentian charism in the 17th century with certain sensitivities toward the problems of his time. For his followers in the 21st century he indicates a direction. We need take up some of those Vincentian sensitivities and look at them from our own perspective. Some of the saint’s insights need to be developed in a new context and perhaps taken in new directions. In this presentation I just want to point out some of the Vincentian sensitivities which might orient our own collaboration with lay ministers.

1. A Missionary Ecclesiology¹

¹ Some of these ideas were developed in another article: “St. Vincent and the Laity,” *Vincentiana* 29 (1985), pp. 306-316.

The place of the laity in the Church is fundamentally an ecclesiological question. The way one understands the Church will indicate the way one understands its ministers and members.² That was just as true in Vincent's time as today. The New Testament presents many images of the Church. Perhaps it is an oversimplification, but for the sake of brevity I would like to reduce the images to two general themes: those that are aimed at community building, or inner-oriented and those whose thrust is missionary, or oriented outward. These two models are not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary. Christian communities need to look out as well in; missionaries inevitably form communities. Nonetheless, in practice, one or the other thrust will be emphasized.

Vincent de Paul was active in the years after the Council of Trent. Like most of his contemporaries in the age of the Catholic Reform, the saint was influenced by the decisions of Trent. Many of his projects (clerical reform, missions, etc) grew out of the concerns of the Council.

The fathers at Trent never directly addressed the issue of lay ministry. Their agenda was affected by the need to reform abuses in the Church and the struggle with Protestantism. The strong criticisms by the Protestant reformers of the Catholic sacramental system and practice moved the bishops to focus on priestly ministry. The need to reform abuses caused them to ask the question: How do we organize the Christian community better? The response of the Council centered around a well organized community, directed by the hierarchy and a better trained clergy. The ecclesiology of the Council was inner-directed. In that context the laity became passive recipients of ministry.

Vincent shared some of the concerns of the post-Tridentine reformers. But his own missionary experience colored his ecclesiology. The fundamental question for him became not, how do we organize the community, but rather, how do we evangelize the poor? It is a shift to a missionary model of the Church. That missionary ecclesiology in turn raised the question of lay ministry. St. Vincent began to understand the interest of lay men and women in service as an opportunity to go out to the poor in new ways. So, he begins to find ways to include them in ministry.

Lay Ministry: Threat or Opportunity?

St Vincent once wrote:

Our little Company has given itself to God for the corporal and spiritual service of the poor, and this from its beginnings, so that at

² Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, (NY: Harper, 1974), p. 150ff.

the same time that it was working for the salvation of souls in the missions, it was looking for a way to assist the sick with the Confraternities of Charity.... The Ladies of Charity of Paris are also a testimony to the grace of our vocation to contribute by them to a greater number of good works within and outside the city (SV VIII, 238).

He goes on to state that the Daughters of Charity are a means given us by God *to do through their hands what we cannot do with our own (SV VIII, 239).*

In this interesting letter to Jacques de la Fosse, St. Vincent is describing the unity among the different groups that flows from the Vincentian charism. Even more interesting is the fact that he is pointing out that vocation of the laity. He recognizes that they have a vocation rooted in baptism and the common call to follow Jesus, evangelizing the poor (SV XIII, 793-794). They participate in the mission of Christ because they do what he did (SV XIII, 809). Lay ministry becomes a golden opportunity and not a threat.

Since Vatican II lay ministry has made great strides. But it has also met with great resistance in some quarters, even within the Vincentian Family. Most of the resistance has arisen because openness to lay participation in the Church always means rethinking the role of the hierarchy and repositioning the clergy. For some people those changes are a threat to status, authority and lifestyle. So, the reaction has been for some to look for ways to maintain the status quo. You can see this in some of the recent theological reflection which emphasizes the ontological differences between clerics and laity and the almost exclusive emphasis on the secular role of the laity.

If lay ministry in the Church and in the Vincentian Family is going to take on a new face in the new millennium, it has to begin with an adequate starting point. Vincent de Paul points us in the same direction as the Second Vatican Council. The Council began its reflection on the Church by emphasizing the common Christian vocation before addressing the question of priestly and lay ministry. The two great symbols mentioned in the conciliar documents are the People of God and the Priesthood of all believers (*LG 35*). The common grounding in baptism paves the way for an adequate understanding of all followers of Jesus, lay or clerics. All are called to discipleship and all share in Christ's ministry as priest, prophet and king.³

Christifideles Laici reiterates the Council's teaching that the Church has a secular dimension because it lives in the world and is concerned about the

³ Kenan Osborne, *Ministry: Lay Ministry in The Roman Catholic Church* (Paulist, 1992), p. 537.

renewal of the temporal order. All are called to participate in this secular dimension, but for the laity this is their particular place for living out their vocation (*CL 15*). I would just like to point out that the official documents of the Church highlight the secular activity of the laity, but do not limit them to that sphere. The same documents also mention the possibility of lay participation in the Church as ministers. So, their service is not solely **ad extra** but also **ad intra**. They have a role in the Church as well as in the world. Some theologies have attempted to exclude the laity from having an effective voice in the Church by over-emphasizing the secular character of the lay vocation. That distorts not only the vision of lay ministry, but also clerical ministry.

2. Vincentian Sensitivities

I would like to point out some of the Vincentian sensitivities which might be helpful today for developing lay ministry.

A. The Experience of the Poor

The fundamental Vincentian experience is the encounter with Christ present in the poor. That was the crucible in which St. Vincent discovered the direction for his own life and the lives of his followers. Every one of the Vincentian institutions — Daughters of Charity, Congregation of the Mission and Confraternities of Charity — has as its goal the corporal and spiritual service of the poor. Vincent leads people to the poor. That is why he insists that the members of the Confraternity visit the poor in their homes (*SV XII, 523-524*). These visits enable the members to know the poor and see reality from a different angle, the perspective of the people on the margins. He wants people to go out to the periphery of society and encounter the poor who dwell there.

B Integral Liberation

The encounter with the poor should lead to solidarity with the afflicted members of Christ. Spiritual and corporal service are not two separate ends, but rather different parts of a holistic evangelization. It is a response to the needs of our brothers and sisters on all levels.

According to St Vincent: *It can be said that to evangelize the poor is not only to be understood as teaching the mysteries necessary for salvation, but rather making the Gospel effective (SV XII, 84).*

Solidarity with the poor is the concrete expression of Christian charity. That charity takes multiple forms: feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, community organization, defense of human rights, the works of justice. Vincent

begins with the needs of the poor and develops an appropriate response. In each case his concern is to liberate people from the evil which afflicts their lives. It is Good News because it responds to the bad news the poor experience daily.

C. Vincentian Spirituality

In St. Vincent's experience the encounter with the poor led to his encounter with Christ. By leading his followers to the poor, he leads them to Christ. He wants them to find Christ in the poor. That is never a self-evident event. The poor are *sacraments* of Christ. That is why St. Vincent will emphasize the importance of prayer and reflection (SV X, 822). They are the means for discovering Christ in the situations of ministry.

Vincentian spirituality is secular. That means that one comes to holiness in the world of the poor and through relationships with them. As one reflects on the encounter with Christ and the poor, one becomes aware of the need to grow in charity, humility and simplicity. That is what Vincent means when he says that the Vincentian laity need to acquire the virtues necessary for their state (SV X, 823).

This secular, Vincentian spirituality is the greatest gift we can share with the Vincentian laity. That does not mean reading them a conference from St. Vincent. Rather, following St. Vincent's example, that means helping them to discover Christ's presence in their experience of service to the poor.

D. Creating Spaces

The early Confraternities of Charity, and later the Ladies of Charity, were creative experiments in lay ministry. The post-Tridentine Church was not noted for including lay people in ministry. St. Vincent creates spaces for them to work and gives them useful and meaningful ministry. He goes beyond the expected limits and creates something new and vibrant. They begin to do things that had not often been done before.

In order to do that he had to change expectations, to explore new paths and to create new structures. Including them in a meaningful way meant repositioning himself as servant of the poor. He does not make all of the decisions. He does not do all of the work. He consults them on everything, giving them a voice in the process of making decisions. In the case of the Confraternities, most of the responsibility for the direction and ministry of the group falls on the members. He trusts the lay ministers because he views them as collaborators in the same evangelizing mission. So, he is not too concerned about maintaining his authority and position. He looks for ways to open spaces for the

laity.

Opening spaces for the laity involves more than finding new jobs for them to do. It means being humble enough to step back and allow the laity to step forward. It means changing attitudes and actions among the laity, but also among the clergy and religious.

E. Women in Ministry

Women in the 17th century had two alternatives: matrimony or the monastery. There was no recognized form of ministry for laywomen. Vincent de Paul knew that situation. *For eight hundred years women have had no public office in the Church*, he tells the Ladies of Charity (SV XIII, 809-810). But, he goes on to say: *In the present moment, this same Providence is directing itself to some of you in order to provide for the needs of the sick in the hospital* (SV XII, 810). God himself is calling women to ministry and discipleship. They have a mission in the Church equal to that of the men. So, he begins to look for ways to include them in the service of the poor.

The Church of our own day has been criticized for insensitivity to women and their concerns. One might rightly ask: *How can the Vincentian Family discover new ways to include women in its mission as equal collaborators?*

F. Formation

Vincent's role in the formation of the clergy is well known. He also contributed to the formation of lay ministers. He did that mostly through his conferences, homilies and letters. In the process he shared a broad vision. He spoke to them about the theology and practice of service. He offered new insights into the Gospel, the teaching of the Church and following Jesus. Little by little, he hoped to make them more capable as ministers.

Lack of formation is one of the biggest roadblocks to lay participation in ministry.⁴ If we intend in the Vincentian Family to truly collaborate then we have to provide better formation. Vincent's example of offering a broader vision points the way. *How can we provide a grounding in the Vincentian tradition, the social teaching of the Church and other things necessary for lay ministers?*

G A Sense of Community

Vincent de Paul never sent people to work alone. Unorganized, solitary

⁴ W. Rademacher, *Lay Ministry: A Theological, Spiritual, Pastoral Handbook* (New York: Crossroads, 1991)

charity tends to fall apart quickly. He provided structures that would enable people to work as a team. The beginnings of the Confraternity of Charity in Châtillon were an attempt to organize lay people to work together.

Vincent's concern is not simply pastoral effectiveness. He tells the Ladies of Charity that they will *love each other as sisters whom God has united in the bond of love* (SV XIII, 422). They have to pray for one another and *warm each other with the warmth of God* (SV XIII, 771). He is trying to create a common spirit, a sense of belonging, which will animate all of the members.

There is a dimension of community that needs to be developed at the local level. The members of any Vincentian group have to create a common spirit through shared values, history and experiences. The means are many and varied: meetings, shared prayer, pastoral reflection, retreats, etc. But, there is also a need to create a sense of belonging to the wider Vincentian Family. Ways of working together have to be explored. More than anything else, opportunities for knowing the members of the other branches of the Family have to be provided.

Conclusion

Vincent de Paul gives us many examples of collaboration with lay ministers. As the Vincentian Family looks to recapture that collaborative spirit, reflection on his example can provide us with some useful elements which can be developed in new ways today.

To Serve the Poor Spiritually and Corporally

*by John Prager, C.M.
Province of USA-East
11.VII.2002*

There are many ways of expressing the Vincentian charism. One way to define it is accompanying the poor in the construction of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom is the center of Jesus' life and mission. It is the proclamation, by word and work, of God's victory over every form of evil. Jesus responds to people's experience of evil, the bad news, with the Good News that evil is being conquered. Paul VI put it like this:

*As the kernel and center of His Good News, Christ proclaims salvation, this great gift of God which is **liberation from everything that oppresses man** but which is above all liberation from sin and the Evil One, in the joy of knowing God and being known by Him, of seeing Him, and of being given over to Him (EN 9).*

The Church exists to evangelize (EN 14). It is within the context of that ecclesial mission that the Vincentian vocation to serve the poor corporally and spiritually has to be understood.¹ St. Vincent never tired of saying that we participate in the mission of Christ. We preach the Good News by word and work.

For Vincentians, charity and evangelization are inseparable. Our corporal and spiritual service is charity. We evangelize, make the Good News effective, through charity. In this talk I want to offer a few ideas about the spiritual and practical dimensions of charity. In reality these two dimensions cannot be neatly separated. For the sake clarity I have done so here.

1. The Spiritual Dimension

The encounter with others

Charity is an encounter between persons. It always has something to do with relationships, the way lives touch. For Vincentians it means entering

¹ For other reflections, see: Jaime Corera, "Nueva Evangelización para Vicentinos Ayer y Hoy," *CLAPVI* 65 (1989), pp. 337-342; J. M. Ibáñez, "El Compromiso con la Justicia, Dimensión Esencial del Servicio Vicenciano" in *Justicia y Solidaridad con los Pobres en la Vocación Vicenciana*, (Salamanca: CEME, 1988), pp. 115-158; Alan McLellan, "Tradición Vicentina y Justicia Social en el Mundo de Hoy," *CLAPVI* 67 (1990) pp. 132-141; José Ubillús, "Nueva Evangelización," *CLAPVI* 76 (1992), pp. 214-228.

people's lives with God's love.² It is the concrete expression of meeting the poor as brothers and sisters and responding to their needs. We can pay people to do our work. But we can never replace the fraternal encounter with the poor. In every human encounter something happens to both parties. In the encounter with the poor something happens to them and something happens to us. What is Good News for them also becomes Good News for us.

What happens to the poor

Charitable service touches the lives of the poor where they are most needy. At the very least it communicates a human concern for them as brothers and sisters. It alleviates their pain and suffering. When we go to the poor the focus of our attention is their needs and concerns. St. Vincent tells us that we are instruments of God's Providence and compassion. Frequently our works of charity are a witness to the presence of God's love. Our charity can provide an opportunity for people to hear God's message of salvation and experience his love.

What happens to us

We say that the poor evangelize us. By that some people mean the so-called *good poor*, those who share in the midst of poverty and are examples of Christian living. The poor who are not so good, the ones that do not come to Church or live a moral life also evangelize us. They call us to love the unlovable. Charity here means expanding our horizons to include those who ordinarily we would not find attractive or agreeable. The encounter with those people evangelizes us because it points out where we need to grow in charity, humility and compassion.

Vincent says that the poor represent Christ for us. That is not a self-evident truth. It is a faith experience. When we go the poor, we see the poor. We attend to their needs. A prayerful reflection on those experiences enables us to encounter Christ presence there.³ Another way of saying this is that if you open your life to the poor, Christ will enter the space to lead to salvation. If we listen attentively, he will speak his Word and point us in the direction of holiness.

2. The Practical Dimension

The spiritual dimension of charity takes place within the practical

² See: André Dodin, "Teología de la Caridad según San Vicente de Paúl" in *Vicente de Paúl y la Acción Caritativo-social*, (Salamanca: CEME, 1976), pp. 1ff.; G. Toscani, *Amore, Contemplazione, Teologia: Gesù Cristo Visto da San Vincenzo*, (Pinerolo: Alzani, 1986).

³ Ted Wiesner, "La Experiencia de Dios en los Pobres," *Anales de la CM 97* (1989), pp. 7-14.

dimension. Let me point out some practical characteristics for our corporal and spiritual service and some of the temptations that are frequently present.

A. Characteristics⁴

1. Entering the world of the poor

St. Vincent knew that the world of the poor, the periphery of society, is not the world of the center. He sent his followers to the margins to encounter the poor who dwell there. This implies more than a geographical change. It means listening to the concerns of the people, understanding their point of view. It is approaching the poor with respect and humility, without thinking we have the answers to all their problems.

2. From above or from below?

If we are not poor our first reaction will always be to see reality *from above*. We are the products of the society and social class in which we were raised. We make judgments using the criteria of the dominant society and not the criteria of the periphery. How should we act? What do the poor need? How should the poor act? What is important and what is not? We have to learn to view things *from below*, from the perspective of the poor. We cannot presume that we know what the poor think or what is important to them. That only happens when we learn to listen.

3. From the perspective of faith or society

Our society communicates many messages through culture and the media. Have more and use more! The poor are responsible for their poverty. There are rights, but no social responsibilities. Christ's message is different. The poor are my brothers and sisters. We are social beings with rights and duties. Love, justice and communion are the principal values. Most Christians accept this. But are these really the criteria we use to make decisions about life and ministry. For that reason prayer, theological reflection on the social teaching of the Church and reading the Scriptures with the people are indispensable. They allow us to view reality with Christ's sensitivities. They question us and our society.

4. Make others capable

Undoubtedly there exist situations of such urgent necessity that the only possible response is to give something. Nevertheless, it is easy to create

⁴ Some of these ideas were presented in my article: "L'icone de St. Vincent de Paul," *Echos de la Compagnie* (February 1998), pp. 73-80.

dependencies. It is more difficult, but of more benefit, to act in ways that make people capable of taking their own steps. A key question is how can we work with people in such a way that they no longer need us?

5. Accompanying or directing others?

Many of us pastoral agents are experts in organizing. The problem is that we make all of the decisions, give advice and resolve all of the problems all of the time. So, the people never learn to be self-directing and responsible. They never become aware of their own capabilities. It is also for that reason that many projects fail when we leave. We have to learn to be present, but quiet, to allow people to discover their own solutions — sometimes through mistakes. When the poor come looking for answers, we have to take the time to sit with them so that they become conscious of their own possibilities.

6. Poor means with poor people

It is sometimes easy to obtain money for our projects with the poor. The question is are we really helping people in the long run with these funds? At times we skip steps in the process of liberation because the opportunity for organization and working together is lost. Sometimes we create an infrastructure — buildings, machines, programs — that the people do not need or cannot maintain with their own resources. We need to use the means of the periphery and not those of the center.

7. Patience

The process of liberation is slow. Sometimes we impose our expectations which have nothing to do with the style of the people. We want to see results and move on quickly to the next project. Are we willing to give up quick solutions in order to accompany the poor according to their rhythm?

8. A socio-political vision

The social sciences tell us that poverty is not the result of individual actions, but rather the consequence of an unjust system. Personal charity is important, but it is not enough. There is a socio-political dimension to charity which needs to be taken into account. The Vincentian Family has been very weak in this area. We fail to analyze the causes of poverty. We do not speak out or, worse, we put the brakes on people, allowing unjust situations to continue. We do not want any problems. We can no longer say that socio-political action is not Vincentian. Charity and work for justice are part of one process.

9. Inculturation⁵

All of the recent Church documents about evangelization and mission highlight the importance of inculturation. In one sense this is respect for the traditions and expressions of the people. But inculturation is more than an appreciation for folklore. It is assuming the concerns of the people, their perspectives, their pains and joys. It is living something of their reality. I am afraid that sometimes we pass through the world of the poor without being sensitive to the people who live there. We have our criteria, our expectations and our projects which are not the same as those of the people. We have to learn to inculturate our charity.

10. Collaboration

Collaboration is one of the key themes of this meeting. The various branches of the Vincentian Family can support each other in the service of the poor. There are many possibilities yet to be explored. The more we can do together the better. Nevertheless, the Vincentian groups are a drop in the ocean. We are not the only ones working with the poor, nor are we the best. Humility and the pressing needs of the poor call us to collaboration with other groups. There are other religious communities, lay movements and diocesan structures within the Church. There are also human rights groups, unions, etc., which are not specifically Christian, but work for the people. How can we work together with them? More than anything, we have to learn to collaborate with the poor. If they are the recipients of charity and not protagonists in the process, they will always remain on the periphery.

B. Temptations

Evangelical charity is at the heart of our vocation and ministry. There are temptations which can impede our service to the poor. No one is immune to them. Let me just point out a few:

1. Comfort

Vincent spoke often about mortification because he knew that seeking after comfort gets in the way of mission. Instead of concentrating on the needs of the poor, we can get lost in taking care of our own needs and wants. Comfort takes many forms. It is not just physical ease. We can be so comfortable in our ways of thinking and acting that we become unwilling to move in new directions for service.

⁵ John Prager, "The Shadow Side of the Vincentian Mission," *Vincentiana*, 39 (1995), pp. 185-196.

2. Power

Most of us are not in positions of real power. Nonetheless the alliances we make with the economically and politically powerful in order to help the poor can stand in the way of service. The closer we are to power the harder it is to be critical.

3. Fear of Consequences

Charity and justice frequently provoke conflicts. While no one looks for clashes, standing with the poor will give rise to them. Most often the conflicts are simply annoying. But, there are situations which are genuinely dangerous either to ourselves or the poor. Whether the consequences are major or minor, the temptation is to avoid whatever causes difficulties.

4. False Dichotomies

There are ways of thinking and acting that create false divisions. They impede service because they offer a distorted vision of reality. They separate what needs to be joined: integration in thought and service. Some examples of these untrue dichotomies are: body-soul, God-world, work-prayer, spiritual-material, charity-evangelization.

5. Discouragement

The poor have so much pain, so many problems and so many setbacks that it is easy to lose hope. Where is God present in the midst of so much suffering? What is the point of all this service? Discouragement in the face of unpleasant realities can paralyze us.

6. Reductionism

Charity moves us toward partial realizations of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom is never fully achieved in the present, but always looks to the future. That is why Paul VI cautions against identifying God's reign with any socio-political agenda (*EN* 35). The same can also be said about many ecclesial agendas and movements within the Church. The Church is at the service of the Kingdom, not the Kingdom itself.

7. Idols

The great temptation for ancient Israel was creating idols, putting something else in God's place. They trusted powers other than God's Word. We

can also allow lesser things to usurp God's role. Some of the modern idols are presented to us by society. Others arise from within our own hearts. When God and his Kingdom fail to occupy the center of our lives, the service of the poor also recedes into the background as less important.

Conclusion

There is no plan or set of structures that will work always and everywhere. The Gospels provide no blueprint for charity. Corporal and spiritual service of the poor is a challenge that we assume, recognizing the present situation, the demands of the Gospel and some of the temptations.

Being Evangelized by the Poor

by Eva Villar
International President of MISEVI
12.VII.2002

Introduction

The title of my presentation has two traditional words rooted in the charism of the Vincentian Family — the poor and evangelization. Paradoxically, they are inseparable and distinct, yet a sign of a style that provides the Church a small grain of wealth.

From within this ecclesial milieu it is not surprising to hear Christians who live out their vocation serving the poor say that “the poor evangelize us.” We also feel the same way. It is with this title and this assertion that we begin our reflection.

The center of Vincentian Spirituality is the poor. This is best expressed by St. Vincent’s phrase in which he acknowledges that the poor are “our lords and masters.”

Evangelization is also a central point of Vincentian Spirituality — spiritual and corporal evangelization. St. Vincent did not miss any occasion to recall this point to the Charities (laity), through whom it all began; to the Congregation of the Mission, to whom he indicated that their service must also include corporal needs; and to the Daughters of Charity, with the request that they not forget “the soul” of the person they were serving.

Today, this idea is expressed in the words “holistic evangelization” for the Good News must reach and transform men and women in every dimension of their lives. It must liberate every man and woman.

Let us now move on to describing in greater depth the meaning of the phrase, which is the title of this talk: “Being evangelised by the poor,” which is an invitation that we cannot refuse given that we make our life in the service of the poor, and pass as witnesses who affirm: “The poor evangelise us.”

1. History of this assertion

The phrase “the poor evangelize us” did not come from St. Vincent but it well could have. All those, who, as laypersons, are concerned with evangelization and have met the poor, have adopted it. It is an experience common to all, to discover the virtues within our brothers and sisters in need that “judge” our choices and lifestyle. Anyone who has spent any time among the poor discovers that there are “seeds of the word” preciously hidden within them that end up evangelizing us.

The clearest Vincentian reference for this “common maxim” is found in the 1985 General Assembly document of the Daughters of Charity (*At the Crossroads*, p. 13): The poor often evangelize us by their patience and their ability to welcome.” But behind this assertion is a tradition that comes from St. Vincent and St. Louise that is expressed by the phrase “the poor are our lords and masters.” I will explain this in the following point.

2. The significance for St. Vincent

Our inheritance, Gentlemen and my brothers, is the poor, the poor: pauperibus evangelizare misit me. What happiness, Gentlemen, what happiness! To do that for which Our Lord came from heaven to earth, and by means of which we too shall go from earth to heaven, to continue the work of God who shunned cities and went to the country to seek out the poor. That is what our rules are concerned with, to help the poor, our lords and masters. O poor, but blessed rules of the Mission which bind us to serve them to the exclusion of cities! Mark, for this has hitherto been unheard of, blessed are those who observe them, because they shall conform their life and all their actions to those of the Son of God. O my God, what a motive have we here for the Company to observe its rules faithfully: to do what the Son of God came on earth to do! That there should be a Company, and that it should be the Company of the Mission, made up of poor folk, entirely devoted to that end, going here and there through hamlets and villages, leaving cities behind it, a thing that has never been done before, and going about to announce the gospel solely to the poor! And yet your rules consist in that (Coste, Conferences to the CMs, 17 May 1658, p. 416).

The expression is not from St. Vincent but he and his followers used it and put it into practice. The poor are our lords and masters for they are the suffering image of Jesus, our Lord and Master.

This is from a theological perspective but St. Vincent as well as St. Louise knew to look at the social aspect. Both knew, from their numerous contacts, just

how demanding, unjust, temperamental and ungrateful the “lords” could be. But at the same time they saw how those who served them did it with care and affection because when serving a master one listens. For Vincentians then, the poor become the masters that we serve, not for money but love.

In the same sense they are our masters because their needs and their situations tell us God’s Will. One learns from a master and Vincentians learn from the poor how to go to God and draw nearer to Jesus Christ. Their suffering calls out to us and invites us to live out a more radical poverty. They show us the sting of poverty. In the end, they evangelize us by their virtues.

After what I have just said it is easy to see that experience has created the expression “the poor evangelize us.” It is also easy, after meeting the poor, to remind ourselves that we are there with them because Jesus told us “go and evangelise,” because the Church, our association, our community has sent us and we find that it is Jesus himself who says to us through them: “go and teach.”

Fr. Robert Maloney, Superior General, made reference to this at the JMV General Assembly in Rome, on 11 August 2000: *We must encircle the poor with much delicacy and prudence; we cannot arrive with our bags full of knowledge (our goods). The poor evangelize us and send us back to our own poverty.*

3. Avoid spiritualizing the phrase and rendering it void of meaning

From the viewpoint of those who are excluded, spirituality takes on demands, not only of solidarity but also of being counter-cultural, opposing a consumer society, injustice, everything that causes exclusion. Living a spirituality from the context of the excluded, in my opinion, means being attentive to the cries of the voiceless and having Christ’s sentiments, being attentive to those whom Jesus identifies himself: “*Because I was hungry, thirsty, naked, imprisoned, sick ... and you came to help me*” (Cf. Mt 25:31-46).

This moves us to take on a gospel viewpoint, one that is the opposite of the dominant culture of our time: that of power, money and superficiality... *You know how those who exercise authority among the Gentiles lord it over them; their great ones make their importance felt. It cannot be like that with you. Anyone among you who aspires to greatness must serve the rest, and whoever wants to rank first among you must serve the needs of all. Such is the case with the Son of Man who has come, not to be served by others, but to serve* (Mt 20:25-27).

This attitude of serving the poor and the fact of being at the frontier is one of the most visible characteristic marks of the gospel message and of the spirituality of the 21st century.

We have said a great deal about the poor evangelizing us. I believe that this already stereotyped phrase brings us to a profound reality, which is that close to the poor and with them we better understand the commandment of love. And when personal needs come about and take up less time and energy because you are busy with those you love, life is completely changed. We better understand the gospel and it has a particular place in our lives that it did not have before.

Yet, there is more. Here, in the First World, when we talk about those who are excluded, we want to speak about those that we, from our consumer and opulent society, forget due to a complexity of economic and social problems. It is obvious that the pockets of poverty that we call the Fourth World are increasing. And now these areas are becoming more alarming with the massive arrival of migrants who have had to leave their country for these same reasons of exclusion, whether we call it globalization or whatever you like.

In this unstructured world that excludes people, the marginalized can barely exist because our selfishness has pushed them to that point. It always distresses me to see, in our Churches, that the place of the marginalized is at the door with outstretched hand.

We speak of seeing the face of God in the poor, but I believe that Vincentian spirituality today, in a world without faith and often without hope, requires of us that the poor see the face of God in us. It is only through love that we are able to witness to them so that they will recognize God's love from hearts filled by the Spirit. As St. John tells us, *"No one has ever seen God. Yet if we love one another God dwells in us, and his love is brought to perfection in us"* (1 Jn 4:12).

4. When we find ourselves among the poor, it is through life's experiences that we begin to understand

I have often experienced what I am going to speak about and it has changed my life and my spirituality. You cannot imagine how many lessons I have learned from other people! Without directly speaking of God, I have seen that the language of love is the clearest and most visible and that it guides us to the source of love, God.

After reflecting together, the MISEVI Coordinating Team brought to light some conditions that we consider essential in order to be evangelized by the poor and we would like to share them with you.

First, we felt that it was important not to consider the poor so much as “poor” but to look upon them as persons.

Within the context of ecclesial charity, within the context of the theories regarding charity and service and even within the context of the Vincentian Family we must “update” our vocabulary, going back to the meanings of words and giving each term a meaning, a sense, ridding them of all the connotations that have been given to them throughout history.

To speak of the poor within all of these areas largely implies a preconceived idea of this person who is poor.

We cannot make the poor the object of our evangelization, our help or our solidarity. The poor person is the subject, is an “I” with whom I am in relationship and from whom I must learn.

Linguistically the word poor means “having a need,” a person who does not have what is needed in order to live. The word poor is a qualitative adjective that limits an individual’s degree of purchasing power. It has become a noun by convenience or linguistic usage, but the poor are, first and above all, people (poor but always a person first). In reality, the word poor is a “disqualifying” adjective because it refers to what the subject has or has not. Normally the use of poor is a negative indicator as one who is poor is one who lacks something. Also, in our society, those in poor health are disqualified, the poor in intelligence, possessions, culture, God’s poor... The poor are all of these and they are disqualified, that is they are out of the big race. This big race that they are participating in is life and it seems that the winners are the flag bearers of a consumer society, of always having more, wanting instant gratification and the defenders of globalization.

The poor man or woman is first of all a person, a human being with rights and it would be well, from time to time, to reread and reflect on the Declaration of Human Rights, where one can also find the rights of women and children, to take them to heart and make them a part of our lives.

Having accepted Human Rights and the Word of God into our hearts, we acknowledge that every person is a child of God and has an inviolable right to be treated as such; that is, with the dignity and respect that all children of God merit, being created in God’s image and likeness.

With this we accept that the most important point is to justly value their dignity and from this comes equality (equal opportunity and equal rights) of relationships with others.

This type of relationship with the impoverished changes the attitude of the evangelizer or the servant of the poor for in this context the other has a place in his/her life and heart. It is a specific person with a face and a name, even a family name, surrounded by specific circumstances that makes him/her who he/she is, this way and in this situation.

This happens when the other, the brother or sister whom we are serving, enters into our life, our heart and we make his/her joys and sorrows our own. It is in this equal relationship that the sharing of my own life with another will occur.

The aspects that I am going to talk about now are aspects in which we feel evangelized. These are the personal experiences of the members of the MISEVI Coordinating Team.

The world's impoverished live day after day sensing the closeness of God's presence. God is near, familiar, someone who can be counted on, can be trusted in during good times as well as times of adversity and suffering. This ability to live in proximity to God evangelizes us.

These are people who, in the most difficult of situations, know how to understand the other, put themselves in the other's place and live the moment as brother or sister with the other person. This sense of family, this natural empathy evangelizes us.

They live simply and it is this simplicity that fills their relationships with the other person and with God. They face situations that arise with simplicity and from this simplicity comes creative love. This simplicity also evangelizes us.

We have lived in the mission *ad gentes* with people who are economically poor but rich in generosity, who give the little they have, even if they are sometimes in need. This generosity evangelizes us.

The joy of small gestures, their sense of the little things evangelizes us.

And of course their ability to relativize their own crosses, to live their own lives in the joy of being saved, all of this reminds us of our attitudes when facing our crosses and we are enlightened. And once again they evangelize us.

But for these aspects, as well as others, to become part of our lives and stir up our dormant values, we feel that we must take on inspiring principles so that our lifestyle will allow us to be open to the possibility of being evangelized:

The first principle that must be present in our lifestyle is **austerity**. It is difficult to program an austere life in the world in which we live. It is even more difficult not to become part of the consumer society. We must live with only the necessities in order to have the dignity of being men and women. Yes, we must use money, resources and technology. Austerity is an evangelical value. St. Matthew tells us: “Stop worrying over questions like, ‘what are we to eat, or what are we to drink, or what are we to wear?’... Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you as well” (Mt 6:31-33).

Austerity and trust in divine providence are two basic principles in order to evangelize and be evangelized by the poor.

Another principle is to live in an attitude of **sharing**, always being ready to share what I and others have, seeking a mutual relationship based on a “smile.” This predisposition takes in all the dimensions of my being, not only my activities or work times. This implies sharing my life, with its feelings and sentiments, in service and evangelization. We need men and women who desire to respond to the call of Jesus Christ: “Go and evangelise,” who firmly believe in the Good News and immediately want to institute the reign of God among all peoples.

In order to achieve this, it would be good to read the gospel with those who are impoverished, to pray with our brother or sister, to listen together and reflect on the Word of God and to share in the Vincentian way. Prayer helps us to form community. In the end it is trying to live in fraternal communion. Praying together unites and enriches us and creates family.

It is good to live in constant reflection, seeking out the causes of poverty, not only just noting them. We must formulate liberating activities for social change but not as a simple aid. We must act with a sense of reality. These are the other principles of our lifestyle that lead us to fully live the assertion that “the poor evangelize us.”

5. Vincentian Lay Missionaries sharing their experiences with us

Some of the laity in the mission *ad gentes* wanted to share some of their own experiences. I did not want to change any of their texts so I did a little cutting and pasting so as not to take up too much time.

From the JMV Missionary Community in San Pedro Sula (Honduras)

- There is something that fills our lives and renews us in our vocation and it is to see how the sick, those living with AIDS, hold on to life and fight up until

the last moment. It is unbelievable to share and participate in their activities and projects, seeing how they are supported and work together ... all the while knowing that death is very near and access to drugs and treatments is very limited. One is surprised by their hope, their trust in God and their own efforts to do a bit more (learning, working, doing things). This shared experience with them evangelizes us and causes us to question our own behavior in relation to life.

- The effort to do more, choosing to be concerned about the ecosystem, community meetings and work in rural areas with the local people, all of this facilitates considerable improvement in the quality of life of all the families. All of this is accomplished thanks to the conviction that nature is a gift from God, an inheritance destined for future generations and that the unity and organization of a community facilitates solidarity for the Kingdom of God. This experience has enlightened our community life and encourages us to continue, in spite of difficulties, to be seeds of hope.
- Knowing and being with children from broken homes, sharing with those who, from their earliest years, have travelled a very difficult road, the efforts of single mothers trying for a better life, their desire to offer their children a better future, the oldest brother, still very young, who replaces the father in the family, ... all of this invites us to appreciate the freedom and innocence of these little ones, images of God, and also of acknowledging the great effort and bravery they put forth to face life with courage and hope.
- The young who live in gangs and who are looked upon as dangerous and rejected by society, these young people who are given to drugs, sex and violence, with a past where one finds a lack of affection and basic needs, are often capable of displaying behaviors of solidarity, helping, caring, and sensitivity. They will enter into the Kingdom of God ahead of us. Because of this, we are convinced that all of us possess a wealth of goodness, even the “worst” are able to show this. And this presents us with a question: those of us who have received so much, in what measure will we use it?
- Faith sharing in an ecclesial community and the witness of laity who try to create and contribute in service for the Kingdom of God, all of this puts into question our manner of living our faith, formation and the missionary vocation that we must renew day after day.

From the JMV Missionary Community in Nacala (Mozambique)

We are four (4) in our community. We share the pastoral work and a part of our lives with the community of Vincentian priests on this mission. As you can imagine, it is a good team but there are never enough hands for all of the work.

I have a beautiful African dress, just my style (those who know me can well imagine). OK, I will be honest and tell you that I have another one but I want to tell you about the one I like the most. I have not worn it often. You could count the number of times I have worn it for I have only had it on twice: Christmas and last Sunday. Why? Because it is a dress for big feasts and holidays, not for everyday.

I am going to share with you what happened the last time I had it on. Last Sunday I was supposed to visit a community in the countryside, like most Sundays. This parish was having a marathon to combat AIDS and it was the last day, so I decided to wear the above-mentioned dress.

So, I felt wonderful up until the moment when we arrived at the Community of San Pedro de Mecurua. I will never forget this day.

When we arrived I began to look around and I began to feel ashamed. I met a woman with severe anemia, not because she was sick, but because of hunger. I felt terrible. I looked at myself and I looked at her and my conscience did the rest.

Then I continued to look around and I noticed that many of the people had become thinner since the last time I had seen them, and a month had not even gone by. The leaders of the area, Mr. Constantino and Mrs. Maria Magdalena, were nothing but skin and bones.

Now I began to understand why the young people of the area were not able to come to the meetings. It was famine time. The harvest had been poor this year and many people did not have enough to eat.

I know this period of famine happens every year and that, thanks be to God if there are no natural disasters, the harvest should be ready next month, but it is something I am not accustomed to yet. Then I thought about how many sacks of corn and manioc, how much food one could have bought with the money for the price of one of these dresses, which for Europe would be cheap, but here it is not.

I thought about it and I was ashamed. It has been a long time since I have felt so ashamed. If I could have disappeared I would have because to hear about famine is one thing, but to see it on the faces of people you know is another.

It is true that you cannot be carried along by sentiment. I know that. I was aware that I could not resolve the problem alone and I am not telling this to elicit sympathy. Those who know me know this. It is true that I am often moved by

emotion but this time I merely want to share what I felt and I do it in the hope that one day this will all change.

This is a beautiful mission, it is true, but there are also hard times where one asks many questions and helplessness reigns.

Yes, the mission is like this. It is not as easy as all that. But, well, the Spirit moves and we must never forget that alone we are nothing, and without God we can do nothing.

I hope this has been a good Vincentian sharing and I ask one thing of all of you, please, do not forget to pray for us.

From Nacala “Mpakha nihiku nikina” (“until next time” in Macau)

Silvia

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

Marian Spirituality and the Vincentian Charism

by Corpus Delgado, C.M.
Province of Zaragoza
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Introduction

I felt it would be good to center our work on two essential elements that make up the two parts of this presentation.

1. What are the inspirational sources of Marian Spirituality within the Vincentian Charism?
2. How can we create a living Marian Spirituality today within our Lay Vincentian Associations?

First, I will give some reflections on the concept of Marian Spirituality.

Marian Spirituality

Fr. Robert Maloney described **spirituality** as such: *It is, on the one hand, the specific way in which a person is rooted in God. It is, on the other hand, the specific way in which he or she relates to the created world. It is insight as the source of action. It is a vision that generates energy and channels it in a particular direction, thereby enabling a person to transcend him or herself. For the Christian, it is a way of seeing Christ and being in him that directs the individual's energies in the service of the kingdom.*¹

Spirituality expresses a relationship with life according to the *Spirit*, following Christ, in a new way of *being and living in the Lord*.

Therefore, referring to Marian Spirituality does not mean revising devotional practices to the Virgin Mary. Referring to **Marian Spirituality, is finding the inspiration to follow Christ in Mary**. Christianity does not consist of formulas, an ideology or concepts. It is above all gift, presence, experience, and life. The figure of Mary stands out as a challenge and an inspiration to embody Christian attitudes and values. Mary is presented to us as the most perfect disciple of Christ and the first Christian, by her attitudes, *“in her own particular life, she fully and responsibly accepted the will of God, because she heard the word of God and acted on it, and because charity and the spirit of service were the driving force of her actions. She is worthy of imitation because she was the first*

¹ R. Maloney, *The Way of Vincent de Paul*, New City Press, New York, 1992, p. 13.

and most perfect of Christ's disciples. All of this has a permanent and universal exemplary value."²

*"Mary is the perfect embodiment of Christian Spirituality."*³ She is *Mistress of the spiritual life*, according to the words of Paul VI.⁴ In this sense, the Church calls her model of Christians and of the Church: *"As St. Ambrose taught, the Mother of God is a type of the Church in the order of faith, charity, and perfect union with Christ."*⁵ *"Thus the daughter of Adam, Mary, consenting to the word of God, became the Mother of Jesus. Committing herself wholeheartedly and impeded by no sin to God's saving Will, she devoted herself totally, as a handmaid of the Lord, to the person and work of her Son, under and with Him, serving the mystery of Redemption, by the grace of almighty God."*⁶ Mary is the perfect disciple of Jesus, she follows him from the Annunciation of the Angel to the foot of the Cross. *"This union of the Mother with the Son in the work of salvation is made manifest from the time of Christ's virginal conception up to his death."*⁷ Mary unreservedly allowed herself to be guided by the Spirit: she was filled with the Holy Spirit; her life was life in the Spirit.⁸

Marian spirituality spontaneously flourished at the heart of the Church since the earliest centuries. Christians from various times have proposed forms, modalities and expressions according to the practices of each era. *"Mary is a grace which continuously nourishes the spiritual life of the faithful."*⁹ It is the same for the Vincentian Family. That is why it is essential for us to draw near to the inspirational sources of Marian Spirituality within the Vincentian Charism and see, once again, how we can promote a **living** Marian Spirituality within the heart of Vincentian Associations **today**.

I. Inspirational Sources of Marian Spirituality within the Vincentian Charism

² *Marialis Cultus*, 35

³ S. Galilea, *El camino de la espiritualidad*. Bogotá, Ediciones Paulinas, 1982, p. 104.

⁴ MC 21

⁵ *Lumen Gentium*, 63

⁶ *Ibid.*, 56

⁷ *Ibid.*, 57

⁸ One must stress Mary's link with the spiritual life: *"If Christian life is open to the Kingdom of God, Mary is the poor virgin who totally, and in an exemplary way, opened herself to God. If Christian life is a life in Christ, Mary is the believer who participates in the Lord's work of salvation along the road of fidelity, listening and perseverance. If it is a life in the Spirit, Mary is the first creation filled with the Spirit of God so that she may act with a new heart as a witness of Christ and to the praise of God who enters history."* S. De Fiores, in *Nuevo diccionario de espiritualidad* (S. De Fiores, T. Goffi, A. Guerra, Editors), Madrid, Ediciones Paulinas, 1991, p. 1162.

⁹ T. Goffi, *Nuevo Diccionario de Mariología*, (S. De Fiores, S. Meo, E. Tourón, Editors), Madrid, San Pablo, 1998, p. 668.

We are not going to linger here on the contents and scope of the expression *Vincentian Charism*.¹⁰ But, allow me to bring up three useful points for our work.

- a) By **Vincentian Charism** we mean the gift of the Spirit given by God in the Church to Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac. A gift of the Spirit shared by all who follow Vincent and Louise in the various institutions and associations that have arisen under their inspiration and that endeavor to live out, maintain, deepen and constantly develop this gift in harmony with the Body of Christ which is in continuous growth.¹¹
- b) Etymologically the word **Vincentian** comes from the word Vincent (Vincentius). We cannot assign the characteristics of Vincentian Charism to the personality of Vincent de Paul alone. It cannot be completely understood without the original contribution of Louise de Marillac. The more one studies the relationship between **Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac**, the more difficult it is to attribute the Vincentian Charism to only one of them.
- c) The profile of Vincentian Charism does not exclusively correspond to the time of the Founders. The charism is a **dynamic reality**, recreated in every epoch, constantly deepened and enriched through the vitality of the responses of each person, each Community and each Association in fidelity to the Spirit.

Having given these points, I will now focus on our theme: **What are the inspirational sources of Marian Spirituality within the Vincentian Charism?**

I will develop this in four sections: 1. Mary's life as we are told of it through the gospels; 2. the Church's faith that shows us Mary as her most eminent member; 3. the experience of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac; 4. the experience of the Vincentian Family since the apparitions to Catherine Labouré. Although belonging to various areas, I believe that it is from these wellsprings that the Vincentian Family draws its spirituality.

1. Mary's life

At the time of St. Vincent and St. Louise and at the time of the apparitions to Catherine Labouré, as well as in our own time, authentic Marian spirituality must

¹⁰ Numerous studies have been published these last few years on Vincentian Charism. Cf., the various authors in *Carisma Vicenciano. Memoria y profecía*. Salamanca, CEME, 2001.

¹¹ Cf., *Mutuae Relationes*, 11; *Evangelica Testificatio*, 11; Sr. J. Elizondo, "Charism and the Vincentian Spirit," in *Vincentiana* (1998), p. 323-340.

be nourished from a personal and genuine encounter with Mary in the **gospel**: “Finally, we wish to point out that our own time, no less than former times, is called upon to verify its knowledge of reality with the word of God, and, keeping to the matter at present under consideration, to compare its anthropological ideas and the problems springing therefrom with the figure of the Virgin Mary as presented by the Gospel.”¹²

There are few New Testament texts concerning Mary. In the epistles, we only find one passage, which is Galatians 4:4. There is also a reference in the Acts of the Apostles in chapter 1, verse 14. There are two indications in Mark’s Gospel (3:31-35 and 6:3) and two in the Gospel of John (2:1-12 and 19:26-27). The most abundant details are contained in the infancy narratives: Matthew 1-2; Luke 1-2.

The original “kerygma” is centered on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, with no direct reference to Mary. As a whole, though, the New Testament recognizes the role of Mary as mother and model in the history of salvation, worthy of acceptance and honor.

a) Mary in salvation history

Mary’s role in salvation history can be represented using two expressions that are found in the Gospel of Luke:

- *Servant of the Lord* (Lk 1:38) — Mary is the instrument chosen by God to accomplish his will, remaining unconditionally faithful to his mission.
- *Blessed among women* (Lk 1:42) — Mary is not simply the one favored above her contemporaries. “The blessing shows participation in the messianic process and contribution to the work of salvation. This cannot be reduced to bringing the fruit of her womb into the world, but in light of events of the Old Testament, it includes liberation and all the consequences involved in being the mother of the Messiah Liberator.”¹³

Mary’s mission in salvation history can also be deepened from the prophecy of Simeon (Lk 2:35), at the time of finding Jesus in the temple (Lk 2:48), or the two episodes in the Gospel of John, related to “the hour” (2:1-12 and 19:26-27).

b) Mary, model for the people of God

During the public life of Jesus, the gospels present Mary to us as the Mother who became a disciple (Lk 8:19-20; 11:28).

¹² MC 37.

¹³ S. De Fiores, *op.cit.*, p. 1160. Cf., Dt 28:4, Jgs 5:24, Jdt 13:18; 15:12.

The Evangelists, especially Luke and John, present us the traits of Mary's personality as the perfect Christian and model for the entire people of God, for the Church. *"All the spiritual dimensions characteristic of the mystical line of the poor of Yahweh in the Old Testament that would subsequently be ratified by the Beatitudes in the Gospel, are focused on Mary and make up her spiritual portrait: poverty (Lk 1:48), service (Lk 1:38, 48; Jn 2:5), fear of God (Lk 1:29, 50), awareness of her own fragility (Lk 1:52), sense of justice (Lk 1:35), solidarity with the people of God (Lk 1:52-55), joy (Lk 1:28, 47), openness and availability to the design of God (Lk 1:35, 51), trust in the promises of a faithful and merciful God (Lk 2:19, 51). All these attitudes show the depth of Mary's faith in harmony with Old Testament biblical devotion. The Magnificat, uniting historical and biblical points, is the song of the poor, true and holy people Israel, inheritor of the messianic blessings. It presents Mary as the daughter of Sion, the "little remnant" of the community of Israel, who has achieved perfection, ready to welcome messianic joy and to bring about the salvific presence of God to humanity."*¹⁴

c) Mary, worthy of honor

The Gospel of Luke invites Christians to honor Mary: *"Henceforth all generations will call me blessed"* (1:48); to join with Israel in calling her *"blessed"* (1:42), recognizing God's action in her, chosen to participate in a fundamental way in God's plan of salvation.

d) Mary, accepted as mother

The Gospel of John invites all who follow Jesus to receive Mary as Mother: *"From this time forward, the disciple received her into his home"* (19:27). As for Jesus' disciple, the reception of his Mother, in faith, was among all the goods and all things that come from being in communion with Christ.¹⁵

As we see, the New Testament gives us the essential elements to fashion Marian spirituality: *"The reading of Divine Scriptures, carried out under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and with the discoveries of the human sciences and the different situations in the world today being taken into account, will help us to see how Mary can be considered a mirror of the expectations of the men and women of our time."*¹⁶

2. The Faith of the Church

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 1161.

¹⁵ *"The scene described by John is of salvific, messianic, ecclesial and universal importance. It is a scene intimately linked with "the hour." The disciple is of significance as a representative typology."* (S. De Fiore, *op. cit.* p. 1162).

¹⁶ *MC*, 37.

The Church is the sacrament of Christ and of those who follow him. It is the principle and most authentic place of encountering the Father. The Church is the “*homeland*,” the privileged place where the Holy Spirit dwells and acts.¹⁷

Through all ages of history, there reappears the temptation to have a Christianity and a spirituality without the Church and the experience she offers us. Nevertheless, it is the criterion of ecclesial community that compares our personal Christian experience with the gospel and the experience of Jesus, so that our experience is neither sectarian nor subjective. It is also the ecclesial community that places the great spiritual tradition of Christianity within our reach and offers us living witnesses, raised up by the Holy Spirit, who are following Jesus. It is in the common celebration of faith, in the deepening of the Word of God, in shared responses to Christian commitments, that the ecclesial community guides its members to live in God by helping each other.

Vatican Council II devoted chapter VIII of *Lumen Gentium* to Mary: The Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the mystery of Christ and the Church. “As it is the fruit of two trends, the presentation of Mary in this chapter is very beautiful, positive, balanced, biblical, ecumenical and ecclesial. Truly, it would be difficult to write with any greater scriptural basis, solid theology or fervor. The incomparable role of Mary in salvation history is stressed but always in relation to Christ and the Church.”¹⁸

In 1974 Paul VI published the Apostolic Exhortation *Marialis Cultus*. It updated the Marian doctrine of Vatican II, clarifying the essential relationship of the Virgin with the Savior and indicating lines of Marian spirituality and devotion, offering Mary as a model: the Virgin who listens, prays and offers — the Virgin Mother.

John Paul II published the encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* in 1987 to “*promote a new and more careful reading of what the Council said about the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the mystery of Christ and of the Church... Here we speak not only of the doctrine of faith but also of the life of faith, and thus of authentic ‘Marian Spirituality.’*”¹⁹

An authentic Marian spirituality must go and draw from this source, which is the faith of the Church, constantly reflected upon and reformulated within the documents of the Magisterium. It is impossible to create an authentic Marian spirituality in the margins or outside of the Church and even less so contrary to the Church.

¹⁷ Cf. S. Galilea, *op. cit.* p. 66-68.

¹⁸ F. M. López Melús, *María de Nazaret, la verdadera discípula*, Salamanca, Sígueme, 1999, p. 335.

¹⁹ *RM*, 48.

3. The experience of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac

For us who are part of the Vincentian Family, the experience of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac must be a constant reference point. It is up to us to live, maintain, deepen and constantly develop the Vincentian Charism.²⁰ Let us look at their experience and these will inspire our own Marian spirituality.

3.1. The experience of Vincent de Paul

A. Dodin, in presenting the Mariology of St. Vincent wrote, “*Saint Vincent seems to be a poor family relative.*”²¹

The time of St. Vincent is notably characterized by Catholic reactions to reforms.²² That is why devotion to Mary increased and often times became excessive. Louis XIII consecrated the Kingdom of France to the Virgin in 1638; Anne of Austria confided the accomplishment of numerous devotions such as pilgrimages to Marian centers, gifts, etc. to Brother Fiacre. Theologians and masters of the spiritual life also developed abundant treatises that furthered devotion to the Virgin and acknowledgement of her privileges. On the popular level there developed numerous confraternities, especially those of the rosary, pilgrimages and other devotional practices.

Within this context, the sparseness of Vincent de Paul’s thoughts and outward signs in regard to the Virgin Mary attracts our attention. In the more than 8,000 pages of letters and conferences, we only find two hundred references to the Virgin Mary: “*Vincent de Paul refers to the Virgin Mary only in passing, using classical terms and a moderate tone.*”²³

In 1600, Vincent de Paul celebrated his first Eucharist at Notre Dame de Remouille. He attributes his freedom from slavery to the Virgin Mary.²⁴ In 1623 Vincent made a pilgrimage to Notre Dame de Buglose with his family. In 1639 he also participated in a pilgrimage to Chartres. He would usually close his letters with the phrase “*in the love of Our Lord and His holy Mother.*”²⁵

²⁰ Cf. *MR*, 11; *ET*, 11.

²¹ A. Dodin, “Le culte de Marie et l’expérience religieuse de M. Vincent de Paul” in, *Vincentiana* (1975), p. 207-225. Other studies on this topic: J. P. Renouard, “El sentido mariano en la experiencia espiritual de San Vicente” in *Las apariciones de la Virgen María a santa Catalina Labouré*, Salamanca, CEME, 1981; V. de Dios, “Marianismo Vicenciano” in *Diccionario de espiritualidad vicenciana*, Salamanca, CEME, 1995; “San Vicente de Paúl y la Virgen María” in *El tiempos de San Vicente y hoy*, Vol. II, Salamanca, CEME, 1997.

²² *If it were not due to abuses where Marian worship has come about, I would not insist that they be totally abandoned*, wrote Luther in 1523.

²³ V. de Dios, *op. cit.*, p. 351; cf., A. Dodin, *op. cit.*

²⁴ *SV I*, 7.

²⁵ Coste Vol. 1, p. 28.

From the establishment of the first Confraternity of Charity at Châtillon-les-Dombes in 1617, Vincent proposed Mary as the patroness: *“And the Mother of God being invoked and taken as patroness in important matters, it can do no other than redound to the glory of the good Jesus her Son, the said Ladies take her as patroness and protector of the work and humbly beg her to take them into her special care.”* We also find similar references in the rules of the Confraternities that would soon follow.²⁶

St. Vincent accepted that the Company of the Daughters of Charity would be consecrated to the Virgin Mary, and that she would be considered the Mother of the Company. He urged the sisters to say the rosary and the Angelus.²⁷ He recommended that the members of the Congregation of the Mission have special devotion to the Blessed Virgin: *“... a special devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. We should try to carry this out perfectly with God’s help: 1st by specially honoring the preeminent Mother of Christ every day, who is also our Mother; 2nd by putting into practice, as far as possible, the same virtues she did, particularly humility and chastity; 3rd by enthusiastically encouraging others, whenever the opportunity and means permit, to show her the greatest reverence and always to serve her loyally.”*²⁸

But Vincent de Paul advised against sentimentality and excess in devotional love for the Virgin Mary. He wrote to Fr. Lambert: *“You would do well to get rid of that young woman. Advise her not to amuse herself with all those notions she has... Neither Our Lord nor the Blessed Virgin had all those ideas, and they conformed to the common life.”*²⁹

Vincent de Paul suggested Mary as a **model**: *“...you should reflect on the example of the Blessed Virgin...,”*³⁰ *“...let us pray to the Blessed Virgin, who, better than all others, has delved into the substance (of the gospel maxims) and put them into practice.”*³¹ Many qualities of Mary to imitate appear within the conferences and letters: she was obedient to the Will of God, modest, discreet, without sin, humble, perfect, full of grace, poor, persevering, a virgin and servant of the Lord.³²

Vincent focused his attention on **three events**, three mysteries in Mary’s life: the Immaculate Conception, the Annunciation and the Visitation. *“These three mysteries constitute the support, letter and spirit of the fundamental steps of her*

²⁶ SV XIV, 126; cf. also, 419, 446, 487, 527, 539, 823.

²⁷ Coste, Conferences to the DCs, pp. 194-195, and p. 1132.

²⁸ Common Rules of the CM X, 4.

²⁹ Coste, Vol. 2, p. 112.

³⁰ Coste, Conferences to the DCs, p. 79.

³¹ Coste, Conferences to the CM’s, p. 652; cf., Coste, Conferences to the DCs, p. 360.

³² Cf. collection, *En tiempos de San Vicente y hoy, op.cit.*, p. 368, where one may find the texts.

progression toward Christ and her life with God."³³ Vincent de Paul's contemplation of Mary was situated within the center of the spiritual universe: given to God to serve God in the poor.

a) The Immaculate Conception

Within the mystery of the Immaculate Conception, St. Vincent saw the humble and chaste Virgin, **emptied of herself so as to welcome God** and allow herself to be filled with God. These are fundamental dispositions for those desiring to empty themselves and clothe themselves in the spirit of Jesus Christ: *"(God) foresaw then that, since His Son had to take human flesh through a woman, it was proper that He take it from a woman worthy of receiving Him, a woman outstanding in grace, free from sin, filled with piety and far removed from any harmful affections. Already, God paraded before His eyes all the women who might be suitable and found none of them worthy of this important piece of work except the most pure and most immaculate Virgin Mary. That is why, from all eternity, God decided to prepare this dwelling place, to adorn her with rarer and more worthy gifts than any other creature, so that she would be a temple of the Divinity, a palace worthy of her Son. If the eternal foresight searched so far to discover this repository for His Son and, once he had found her, adorned her with all the graces that could embellish a created being, as God declared through the angel sent as an ambassador, how much more should we foresee the day and the dispositions required for receiving him."*³⁴

Welcoming God, being filled with God, clothing oneself with Christ, self-emptying, as did the Immaculate one that is the first event that Vincent de Paul stressed regarding the Virgin Mary.

b) The Annunciation

Humility prepared and sustained the offering to God. Knowing God and recognizing God as the only Lord, **knowing one's smallness before God, giving oneself to God** to serve one's neighbor, in order to accomplish God's work — that is the second movement that Vincent discovered in Mary within the Annunciation: *"We must recognize the essence and existence of God and have some knowledge of His perfections before offering sacrifices to Him. That is natural for, I ask you, to whom do you offer gifts? To the great, to princes and Kings. It is to them you render homage. This is so true that God observed this order in the Incarnation. When the angel went to salute the Blessed Virgin, he began by acknowledging that she was replenished with the graces of Heaven: Ave, gratia plena: you are full of grace, you are filled with God's favor. Ave gratia plena. He recognized the fact then, and praised her as being full of grace.*

³³ A. Dodin, *op. cit.* p. 219.

³⁴SV XIII, 35.

And then what did he do? He made her the beautiful gift of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. The Holy Spirit, within her virginal womb formed a body. God created a soul, united it to this body. And immediately the Word united Himself to this soul and body by a wonderful union. And, in this manner, the Holy Spirit wrought the ineffable mystery of the Incarnation. Praise preceded sacrifice”³⁵.

Like Mary, in the Annunciation, we must give ourselves to God to accomplish his work. *“It is said then: we must seek the Kingdom of God. We must seek. This is but one word. Yet it seems to me to say much. It means that we should place ourselves in such a state as always to aspire after what has been recommended to us, to labor unceasingly for the Kingdom of God and not remain in a languishing and inactive state.... Seek: Seek, this implies care; this implies action.”³⁶*

c) The Visitation

Emptied of ourselves and given to **God**, our life is **at the service of the poor**: *“You are given to God for the service of the Poor.”* St. Vincent discovered this third movement of the spiritual journey in Mary’s visit to her cousin Elizabeth. He suggested Mary’s promptness, as exemplified within the Visitation, as a model of service to the poor: *“They shall honor the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin who went to visit her cousin cheerfully and promptly.”³⁷* Thus, he determined specific applications for the life of the Daughter of Charity: *“The Company of the Daughters of Charity is established to love God, to serve and honor Our Lord, their Patron, and the Blessed Virgin. And how will you honor him? Your rule tells you, for it goes on to inform you of God’s design in establishing your Company to serve the sick poor corporally, by supplying them with all they need, and spiritually, by taking care that they live and die in a holy state.”³⁸*

Whatever road we take, Monsieur Vincent, without fail, guides us towards the poor. Our life, like Mary’s, is totally given to God for the service of the poor.

3.2 The experience of Louise de Marillac

Contrary to that of St. Vincent, Mary’s presence in St. Louise’s correspondence and writings is rich, abundant and sometimes even written in a systematic way.

³⁵ Coste, Conferences to CMs, p. 698.

³⁶ Coste, Conferences to CMs, p. 472.

³⁷ SV XIII, 419.

³⁸ Coste, Conferences to DCs, p. 17.

3.2.1 The great dignity of Mary

We have some writings of St. Louise where she discusses the fruits of her meditations and her reflections on the great dignity of the Virgin Mary. She presents Mary as:

- a) God's collaborator in the Incarnation; "The Son of God having taken human form in the womb of Mary"³⁹;
- b) Very united to Christ Jesus who lives in her: "a greater love for her Son and a stronger union to his human divinity"⁴⁰;
- c) Participant in the mystery of God in Jesus Christ⁴¹;
- d) Full of grace⁴²;
- e) Mother of mercy⁴²;
- f) Mother of grace⁴⁴;
- g) Collaborator, at the foot of the cross, in redemption.⁴⁵

3.2.2. The Virgin Mary, Immaculate, conceived without sin.

One of the reflections of St. Louise is centered on the mystery of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary.⁴⁶ It concerns a very developed and elaborate reflection. St. Louise wanted to develop and write her thoughts about the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary. She assures us from the beginning of this development that she intends to write them "entirely." The Church had not yet proclaimed the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception (that would occur on 8 December 1854) when St. Louis wrote this text. This feast, however, so strongly rooted in the people, was already being celebrated. St. Louise's text perfectly captures what the Church would later teach on the Immaculate Conception.

- The Immaculate Conception is understood within the context of God's Salvific Plan, his design of love.
- Even though she was conceived without sin, Mary never ceased belonging to the lineage of Adam. She had been prepared to be a worthy dwelling for the Son of God.
- Mary, conceived without sin and chosen by God, responds by a sound life and, full of grace, she continues to grow in grace.

³⁹ Louise de Marillac, *Spiritual Writings*, A14.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, A 32b.

⁴¹ Cf., *ibid.*, A 32.

⁴² Cf., *ibid.*, A 32.

⁴² Cf., *ibid.*, A 14b.

⁴⁴ Cf., *ibid.*, A. 16; 100.

⁴⁵ Cf., *ibid.*, A. 16; 100.

⁴⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, the complete text of A 31b; cf., M. 35b.

- Having been conceived without sin, Mary is free from concupiscence that leads to sin.
- We, sinners, must imitate the life of Mary, honoring her for her great dignity and asking her intercession because no one is as united to Christ as she.

It is worthwhile to slowly read the text of St. Louise and to discover the earnestness of her presentation and the richness of her intuition. This can serve as a suggestion for Marian spirituality within the Vincentian charism.

3.2.3 Marie, the ideal of life

St. Louise de Marillac discovers and proposes the Virgin Mary as the ideal for life.

- a) Model of all states of life⁴⁷;
- b) Model of accomplishing the will of God⁴⁸;
- c) Model of poverty⁴⁹;
- d) Model of purity.⁵⁰

3.2.4 Devotion to the Virgin Mary

a) Of what does devotion to the Virgin Mary consist?

There is a text by St. Louise that perfectly synthesizes of what devotion to the Virgin Mary consists.⁵¹ It is a systematic treatise that can enlighten us today.

⁴⁷ Cf., *ibid.*, A 4.

⁴⁸ Cf., *ibid.*, A 4, A 10.

⁴⁹ Cf., *ibid.*, L 461.

⁵⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, L 303 b, 333, 639.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, M 33: "All truly Christian souls should have great devotion to the Blessed Virgin, especially in her role as Mother of God. They should honor her, also, because of the virtues with which God endowed her for the accomplishment of his holy designs. Her eminent dignity obliges us to honor her in some way each day. The best way to do this is to unite ourselves to the Church, especially at those times which it has set aside for the express purpose of paying homage to Mary. We should rejoice with her and congratulate her for the choice which God made of her by uniting his humanity and his divinity within her womb. We should also implore her to assist us to preserve in our own hearts a close union with God. When we are filled with gratitude for the graces that God has bestowed upon us through the Incarnation and the exemplary life of Jesus Christ, let us look upon the Blessed Virgin as the channel through which all these benefits have come to us and thank her by acts of love. Let us take Our Lady as the model for our daily lives and bear in mind that the best way to honor her is by imitating her virtues. We should particularly honor her purity since we are the spouses of Jesus Christ. We should also imitate her humility which led God to do great things in her. Following the example she gave us by living apart from her parents as a very young child, we must be detached from all things. In all of our actions, let us practice these virtues, of which Mary has given us the example, and beg her to offer them to her Son in our name. Let us celebrate, in a special way, the Church feasts honoring Mary and meditate, during the day, on the mystery proposed. Each day, let us implore her to help us to render to God the service we have promised him and to be as submissive as she was in accomplishing his holy will. We should faithfully recite, each day, those prayers which we have chosen to honor her. These should include acts

All Christians must

- Have a great love for the holy Virgin Mary;
- Celebrate feasts in her honor in the daily liturgy;
- Imitate her virtues;
- Choose some “little devotional practices” to Mary.

b) The “little devotional practices” of St. Louise in honor of the Virgin

In addition to her reflections and meditations on the Blessed Virgin, we also find some clear traces of these “*little devotional practices*” to honor the Virgin Mary in the correspondence and writings of St. Louise. Let us call to mind the most important:

1. St. Louise wrote a prayer of offering to the Virgin, placing her son and herself under the protection of Mary after the death of her husband, Antoine Le Gras.⁵³

2. In her *Rule of Life* in the world, St. Louise enumerates several devotional practices in honor of the Virgin Mary:

- The Office of the Blessed Virgin;
- A quarter of an hour of prayer exactly at midday to honor the moment when the Incarnation of the Word took place in the womb of the Blessed Virgin;
- The rosary every day, meditating upon one of the mysteries;
- The renewal of her vows and good resolutions every first Saturday of the month, having chosen Saturday because she took the Blessed Virgin for her protectress;
- Praying the Hail Mary, honoring the Blessed Virgin;
- Fasting on eves of all feasts of the Blessed Virgin.⁵³

3. In the catechism drawn up by St. Louise, she explained and recommended praying the Hail Mary and the rosary.⁵⁴

4. In a letter to the Abbe de Vaux, St. Louise gave advice on the manner in which a sister could prayer the rosary: “*I will give you my views on the devotions for Sister Madeleine. I think that she could easily say two decades of her chaplet daily and three on Saturday for the complete rosary for the week.*”⁵⁵

of love as well as of joyful praise for the glory that is hers in heaven. Finally, let us continue to hope that we will one day be with her and will thus be able to render to her all the honor due to her in the divine plan.”

⁵³ *Ibid.*, A 4.

⁵⁴ *Les origines de la Compagnie des Filles de la Charité: Documents*, n° 823.

⁵⁵ *Louise de Marillac, Spiritual Writings*, L.55.

5. St. Louise prepared and offered paintings of the Virgin as an expression of her love for her and her desire to honor her appropriately.⁵⁶

6. St. Louise drew up a little rosary. She wrote to St. Vincent: *“This little chaplet is the devotion for which I asked permission of your Charity three years ago as a personal devotion. I have in a small box a quantity of these little chaplets, along with some thoughts on this devotion written on a piece of paper, which with your permission, I wish to leave to all our sisters after my death. Not one of them knows it. It honors the hidden life of Our Lord in his state of imprisonment in the womb of the Blessed Virgin and congratulates her on her happiness during those nine months. The three small beads hail her under her beautiful titles of Daughter of the Father, Mother of the Son, and Spouse of the Holy Spirit. That is the main thought behind the devotion. By the grace of God, unworthy as I am, I have continued this devotion since the time I mentioned, but I hope to discontinue it, aided by God’s same grace, if your Charity so orders. By means of this little exercise I intend to ask God, through the Incarnation of his Son and the prayers of the Blessed Virgin, for the purity necessary for the Company of the Sisters of Charity and for the steadfastness of this Company in keeping with his good pleasure.”*⁵⁷

St. Vincent certainly did not authorize her to practice this “devotion.” She alludes to this in a letter: *“I feel that I must tell your Charity that I was and still am sorry at having to abandon those little prayers because I believe that the Blessed Virgin wanted me to render her this small tribute of gratitude. But with her, I console myself by offering my renunciation to her and by resolving to please her in some other way and to serve her with greater fervor....”*⁵⁸

The intention of St. Louise lives on however, in the traditional prayer the Daughters of Charity recite between the mysteries of the Rosary, *Most Holy Virgin....*

7. In the Rule for the Sisters of the Hospitals, St. Louise lists the recitation of the rosary.⁵⁹

8. St. Louise had the practice of invoking the intercession of the Blessed Virgin in her prayers: *“...Through these merits ... and for the love that you bear the Blessed Virgin.”*⁶⁰

3.2.5 Mary, only Mother of the Company

⁵⁶ Cf., *ibid.*, L 303b, A 85.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, L 303b.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, L 304.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, A 88.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, A 26.

St. Louise de Marillac probably did not know her mother, but she always saw Mary as the Only Mother and confided to the Blessed Virgin, Only Mother, what she loved most in this world: her son and the Company of the Daughters of Charity. She wanted this Company to be consecrated to Mary, whom she always considered its Only Mother.

The following texts capture these desires and convictions, especially those concerning her correspondence with St. Vincent.

1. St. Louise asked St. Vincent for permission to go on a pilgrimage to Chartres: *“I beg you most humbly to allow me to make a pilgrimage to Chartres during your absence so that I may entrust all our needs and the suggestions I have made to you to the care of the Blessed Virgin. The time has surely come for me to reflect on myself in the sight of God. I must tell you that I am convinced that the good of our little Company requires it.”*⁶¹

2. St. Louise gave an accounting of her pilgrimage to Chartres to St. Vincent: *“...On Monday, Feast of the Dedication of the Church of Chartres, I offered to God the designs of his Providence on the Company of the Daughters of Charity. I offered the said Company entirely to Him, asking Him to destroy it rather than let it be established contrary to His holy will. I asked for it, through the prayers of the Holy Virgin, Mother and Guardian of the said Company, the purity of which it stands in need. Looking upon the Blessed Virgin in the accomplishment of the mystery of the Incarnation, I asked Him for the grace of fidelity for the Company through the merits of the Blood of the Son of God and of Mary. I prayed also that He might be the strong and loving bond that unites the hearts of all the sisters in imitation of the union of the three Divine Persons. In my prayers for myself, I placed in the hands of the Blessed Virgin the decision to be made....”*⁶²

3. St. Louise asked St. Vincent that the Company be consecrated to Mary and that she be chosen as its only Mother: *“How can I express to your Charity, in the name of the entire Company of our Sisters, how fortunate we would consider ourselves if tomorrow at the holy altar, you placed us under the protection of the Holy Virgin? I beg your Charity to obtain for us the grace to be able, henceforth, to look upon her as our only Mother since, until now, her Son has never allowed anyone to usurp this title in a public act. Please approve this request for the love of God and implore for us the grace to do what we must and will do, if your Charity sees fit and is willing to teach us.”*⁶³

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, L 110.

⁶² *Ibid.*, L 111.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, L 602.

4. St. Vincent de Paul said the following prayer in his conference of 8 December 1658: *“Since it is under the standard of your perfection that the Company of Charity was established, if we have hitherto called you our Mother, we now beseech you to accept the offering which we make to you of the Company in general and of each of its members in particular. And because you permit us to call you Mother and you are the Mother of mercy, the channel through which all mercy flows, who did obtain from God, as we may believe, the establishment of this Company, be pleased to take it under your protection.”*⁶⁴

5. St. Louise spoke about the Blessed Virgin as the Only Mother at several retreats: *“...give greater honor to the Holy Virgin and to renew the total dependence of the Company upon her as her most unworthy daughters, who look on her also as our most praiseworthy and only Mother.”*⁶⁵ *“...the Holy Virgin is your true and only Mother.”*⁶⁶ *“...like a true Daughter of Charity, you must accept all that is said to you by the one who, here on earth, represents you true Superior in heaven.”*⁶⁷

6. In the last words of her Spiritual Testament, St. Louise stressed this to the sisters: *“Pray earnestly to the Blessed Virgin, that she may be your only Mother.”*⁶⁸

As we have seen, the presence of Mary is abundant, clear and solid in the experience of St. Louise. In the Vincentian Family, we cannot neglect drawing from this wellspring.

4. The Experience of the Vincentian Family since the Apparitions to Catherine Labouré

St. Catherine Labouré (1806-1876) and the message of the Medal of the Mother of God has had a decisive influence on the life of all groups in the Vincentian Family, and especially with regard to the direction of their Marian spirituality. It suffices to call to mind several factors:

At the time of the apparitions to St. Catherine Labouré, the CM, as well as the Company of the Daughters of Charity and the Confraternities of Charity, were practically dispersed and more or less fragmented. The Miraculous Medal and its Marian spirituality are decisive in understanding the rebirth of former Vincentian foundations.

⁶⁴ Coste, *Conferences to the DCs*, p. 1179.

⁶⁵ *Louise de Marillac, Spiritual Writings*, 35b.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, L 245.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, L 598.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 835.

John Gabriel Perboyre (1802-1840) found the strength to witness to Christ by his life in devotion to the Virgin Mary. He propagated the Miraculous Medal in China, convinced that “*the entire world be filled with Mary’s mercy.*” He was one of so many witnesses to Christ in the Vincentian Family.

Several groups belonging to the Vincentian Family have rooted themselves in these apparitions to St. Catherine Labouré: Vincentian Marian Youth, the Association of the Miraculous Medal and groups that have arisen from these.

Frederick Ozanam (1813-1853) died on the feast of the birth of Our Lady, a feast for which he had great devotion throughout his entire life. He himself carried the medal and took an interest in communicating the conversion of Ratisbonne through the intercession of the Virgin of the Medal. He established the day of the Immaculate Conception as a feast for the Conferences.

We could say that the history of the Vincentian Family could not be understood without this reference to the Immaculate Virgin of the Miraculous Medal.

The Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity and of the CM, the Statutes of the Vincentian Marian Youth and the Association of the Miraculous Medal, as well as the practices of other groups, show us the value of the experience of Catherine Labouré and the Miraculous Medal as a source of Marian Spirituality in the Vincentian Family.

II. Giving Form Today to a Living Marian Spirituality within Lay Vincentian Associations

After having considered the sources from which the Vincentian Family draws its Marian spirituality, it is important to center our attention on some suggestions that would help give it form today. We are specifically referring to Lay Vincentian Associations given the nature of this Vincentian Month.⁶⁹

We want to **give form** to a living Marian Spirituality **in today’s world**. Does this mean that Marian spirituality is not ongoing? Is not Jesus Christ “*the same yesterday, today and forever*” (Heb 13:8)? So then, why do we want to give form to a living Marian spirituality in today’s world? Certainly, Christ is the same, but the human person, in which he must be received in every age of

⁶⁹ As we know, there are numerous groups and associations in the Vincentian Family. Here we are referring to the Lay Vincentian Associations founded by St. Vincent and St. Louise (AIC), or that developed from the apparitions to St. Catherine Labouré (1830) (AMM, JMV, MISEVI) or around the apparitions (SSVP). Cf. Betty Ann McNeil, DC, *Monograph I, The Vincentian Family Tree*, Vincentian Studies Institute, 1996.

history, is not the same. The anthropological and cultural realities, in which the person's life is situated, are not the same either. From this it is necessary to return in each era to drink at the inspirational sources and update their expressions. In every period of the Church, Mary has nourished the spiritual experiences of Christians, but her person has taken very diverse forms throughout history. At the beginning of the Third Millennium, can the Vincentian Family, in drawing from the inspirational sources, give form to a **living Marian spirituality**?

Allow me to offer **some suggestions**:

1. Love Mary

“All truly Christian souls must have a great love for the Blessed Virgin, and honor her greatly for her quality as Mother of God, and for the virtues God has given her in this regard.” These words written by St. Louise, give us a first suggestion for a living Marian spirituality. The Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity express it in this way: *“Whoever seeks to follow Jesus Christ will also encounter her who received him from the Father, Mary the first Christian....”*⁷⁰

Throughout history, and in each Vincentian institution or group, the Vincentian Family has accorded a privileged place to Mary. Mary is recognized and invoked as **Mother** by the Vincentian Family. All Christians, clearly each of us, as members of the Vincentian Family, are invited to welcome Mary into their own home.⁷¹ In Marian Associations, therefore, we must promote **a true love for Mary**, not forgetting the associated observation of S. De Fiores: “What the Christian of today desires is an authentic, personal encounter with Mary, free of obstacles and outdated visions, diligently based on the gospel and expressed in a totally renewed dialogue with her.”⁷²

Here is the first suggestion: That in all of our associations, we cultivate a genuine love of Mary.

2. Live like Mary

St. Louise is going to guide us in a new way to formulate our second suggestion: *“In carrying out our actions, let us cast our eyes on those of the Blessed Virgin, and think that the greatest honor we could give her is to imitate her virtues.”*

⁷⁰ C 1.12.

⁷¹ Cf., Jn 19; RM, 45.

⁷² S. De Fiores, *op. cit.* p. 1151.

Vatican Council II states this clearly: *“True devotion consists neither in sterile or transitory affection, nor in a certain vain credulity, but proceeds from true faith, by which we are led to recognize the excellence of the Mother of God, and we are moved to a filial love towards our mother and to the imitation of her virtues.”*⁷³

The great directional change of Vatican Council II within Marian spirituality consisted in viewing Mary as *“the one we should imitate”* more than *“the one we should pray to.”* Mary is more exalted through her functions than her privileges, more through her example than by her royalty.⁷⁴

Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac were very clear in giving us Mary as a life ideal, as a model. The Miraculous Medal is equally a summary of the life of Mary and a support for Christian life.

In drawing from the inspirational sources of Marian spirituality within the Vincentian charism, our Vincentian Associations are able to try and give form to these Christian and Marian traits within their own lives:

a) Called and chosen

Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac unreservedly affirmed Mary’s Immaculate Conception. The apparitions to Sr. Catherine Labouré and the Miraculous Medal also proclaim this same mystery in an obvious way: *And if... the Virgin of Nazareth is also called ‘blessed among women’ it is because of that blessing with which ‘God the Father’ has filled us ‘in the heavenly places, in Christ’... It is a spiritual blessing which is meant for all people and which bears in itself fullness and universality (“every blessing”)... This blessing, however, refers to Mary in a special and exceptional degree... In the mystery of Christ she is present even ‘before the creation of the world,’ as the one whom the Father ‘has chosen’ as Mother of his Son in the Incarnation. And, what is more, together with the Father, the Son has chosen her, entrusting her eternally to the Spirit of holiness.*⁷⁵

Like Mary, each of us, from the time of our baptism, are called to honor within ourselves *“the state of grace, which is friendship with God, communion with him, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit,”*⁷⁶ in being holy and irreproachable in love.

⁷³ LG, 67.

⁷⁴ T. Goffi, *op. cit.* p. 671.

⁷⁵ RM, 8.

⁷⁶ MC, 57.

St. Vincent and St. Louise often repeated: “*called by God... what a great vocation!*”⁷⁷

From the acknowledgement of the magnificence of God’s choice regarding each of us on the day of our baptism⁷⁸ flows the generosity of our response and the urgency of our everyday responsibilities.

b) Attentive and available to the Will of the Father

Mary is introduced in a precise manner within the mystery of Christ through the Annunciation. “*She who at the Annunciation called herself the ‘handmaid of the Lord’ remained throughout her earthly life faithful to what this name expresses. In this she confirmed that she was a true ‘disciple’ of Christ, who strongly emphasized that his mission was one of service: ‘the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many’ (Mt 20:28). In this way Mary became the first of those who, ‘serving Christ also in others, with humility and patience lead their brothers and sisters to that King whom to serve is to reign.*”⁷⁹

The Annunciation has inspired the members of the Vincentian Family since the time of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac. The life of Catherine Labouré is a story of fidelity to the Will of God woven in work, simplicity, humility, charity and silence. The Miraculous Medal contributed to writing the heroic pages of fidelity to God, of true Christianity and conversion. Like Mary, as members of the Vincentian Family, we must openly live by the transforming strength of the Spirit in order to know how to give ourselves unreservedly to the accomplishment of God’s Will, always being attentive and available.

c) Allowing Christ to take form in us

“Mary’s entire existence was in total union with her Son. She was the faithful accompanier of the Lord along his entire journey. Her divine maternity guided her to a total giving, a generous giving, clear and permanent. She made a love relationship with Christ, intimate and holy, which found its fulfillment in glory.”⁸⁰ The Miraculous Medal is a visible expression of this unity of the Mother with Christ, especially through the union of the two hearts and the letter M interlaced with the cross, as seen on the reverse of the medal. We identify with Jesus Christ, we put on the spirit of Jesus Christ in order to continue his mission, belonging to the very heart of the Vincentian charism. In this process,

⁷⁷ Louise de Marillac, *Spiritual Writings*, A.89B, p. 791; cf. L. 217; cf. Coste, *Conferences to the DCs*, p. 215.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* A.3.

⁷⁹ *RM*, 41.

⁸⁰ Cf. *MC*, 25.

the members of the Vincentian Family cannot cease to look upon Mary whose entire existence is in full communion with Christ.⁸¹

d) To proclaim the gospel of love to the poor

Mary, the perfect disciple of Christ, is the one who lived the greatest identification to Christ, directly collaborating in his works. *“She was far from being a timidly submissive woman or one whose piety was repellent to others.”*⁸² She was not only the admirable fruit of redemption, but an active collaborator.

Paul VI described evangelization as an authentic childbirth: *“The Church, through evangelization, engenders new sons and daughters. This process, which consists of transforming from within, renewing humanity itself, is a veritable renaissance to life.”*⁸³ Paul VI also stressed the extent of Mary’s service and showed the variety of situations where the one following Christ must make the strength of the gospel present: *“Mary is a woman of strength who experienced poverty and suffering, flight and exile (cf., Mt 2:13-23). These are situations that cannot escape the attention of those who wish to support, with the Gospel spirit, the liberating energies of humanity and of society.”*⁸⁴

Evangelization and service of the poor constitute the purpose of all the institutions and associations of the Vincentian Family. On several occasions St. Vincent de Paul suggested **Mary’s promptness in the Visitation** as a model for serving the poor: *“They shall honor the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin who went to visit her cousin cheerfully and promptly.”*⁸⁵ The open hand of the Virgin of the Miraculous Medal and her mantel that covers the earth and embraces the poor; the visitation of Mary to Elizabeth and the spirituality of the *Magnificat*; through the concern of a Mother who cooperates in the birth and development of brothers and sisters, she cooperates with a maternal love.⁸⁶ There, among others, are some Marian references that continue to inspire evangelizing service and the new creativity of charity in the Vincentian Family faced with the poverty of a thousand faces!

We said at the beginning of my presentation that to speak about Marian spirituality, is to find in Mary the inspiration to follow Christ. This is our second suggestion to live a Marian Spirituality today: Live like Mary:

- Called and chosen;
- Attentive and available to the will of God;

⁸¹ *“In the Virgin Mary everything is relative to Christ and dependent upon him”* MC 25.

⁸² MC, 37.

⁸³ Cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 18.

⁸⁴ MC, 37.

⁸⁵ SV XIII, 419; cf., Coste, Vol. I, p. 503; SV II, 247; Conferences to the DCs, p. 230.

⁸⁶ Cf. RM, 6.

- Allow Christ to take form in us;
- Announce the gospel of love to the poor.

3. Celebrate the mystery of Christ with Mary

In formulating our third suggestion for a living Marian spirituality within our Vincentian Associations today, we once again turn to the recommendation of St. Louise: *“This quality obliges us every day to give Him honor; and the greatest honor we can give Him is to unite our spirit to the intention of the Holy Church in the order that she offers us to praise Him in the various liturgical seasons.”*

Since Vatican Council II, the documents of the Church clearly show us the way:

- “The Liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows”⁸⁷;
- “In celebrating this annual cycle of the mysteries of Christ, Holy Church honors the Blessed Mary, Mother of God, with a special love. She is inseparably linked with her son’s saving work”⁸⁸;
- “Christ is the only way to the Father, and the ultimate example to whom the disciple must conform his own conduct, to the extent of sharing Christ’s sentiments, living his life and possessing his spirit. The Church has always taught this and nothing in pastoral activity should obscure this doctrine. But the Church, taught by the Holy Spirit and benefiting from centuries of experience, recognizes that devotion to the Blessed Virgin, subordinated to worship of the divine Savior and in connection with it, also has a great pastoral effectiveness and constitutes a force for renewing Christian living”⁸⁹;
- “Mary has by grace been exalted above all angels and men to a place second only to her Son, as the most holy mother of God who was involved in the mysteries of Christ: she is rightly honored by a special cult in the Church.... The various forms of piety towards the Mother of God, which the Church has approved ... ensure that while the mother is honored, the Son through whom all things have their being and in whom it has pleased the Father that all fullness should dwell is rightly known, lived and glorified and his commandments are observed”⁹⁰;
- The Church is invited to be inspired by Mary “model of the spiritual attitude with which the Church celebrates and lives the divine mysteries”⁹¹;

⁸⁷ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁸⁹ *MC*, 57

⁹⁰ *LG*, 66.

⁹¹ *MC*, 16.

- “When the Church considers the long history of Marian devotion she rejoices at the continuity of the element of cult which it shows, but she does not bind herself to any particular expression of an individual cultural epoch or to the particular anthropological ideas underlying such expressions. The Church understands that certain outward religious expressions, while perfectly valid in themselves, may be less suitable to men and women of different ages and cultures.”⁹²

In light of these principles, it is sometimes necessary that we revise and update our forms of piety and devotion to the Virgin Mary. Taking into account these criteria, we must be attentive to the details of the expression of our devotion to the Virgin Mary because these expressions cannot follow a path other than that of our Vincentian spirituality.

Conclusion

In the Word of God, in ecclesial community life and in our own spiritual tradition, we find inspiring sources for Marian spirituality in our Vincentian charism. Following Christ in the Vincentian charism finds inspiration today in this Marian spirituality.

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

⁹² *Ibid.*, 36.

Pilgrimage to Vincentian sites in Paris
Homily in Clichy

Readings: Matthew 11:25-27; Isaiah 10:5-7; 13-16

by Bernard Schoepfer, C.M.
Province of Paris
17.VII.2002

It is rarely good to pass for someone who is “poor,” “humble,” or “self-effacing.” The first places go to “fighters,” “go-getters,” or “high performers.” It is not good if one is not profitable: one risks being left out of the game. It is not good to have a handicap: one risks being tossed along side of the road. They know all about that — the victims of the money king, lots of money. They know all about this — those who are subjected to the insane laws of this king! The taste for might, the search for power and strength, these are the realities that intoxicate those who let themselves be taken in by them. Let us recognize this race for power, which is at the heart of our humanity.

The gospel we have just heard, reveals Jesus as the one who does not seek power. He receives from Another: the Father. It is in encountering the little ones that he discovers the mystery of God. “What you have hidden from the wise and learned, you have revealed to these little ones.” The only ones to understand the mysteries of God are those who are close to God’s heart. Here we have the first Beatitude: “Blessed are the poor of heart.”

Already in the Old Testament, the heralded Messiah would not be a conqueror but a humble person, close to those who work by the sweat of their brows. On Palm Sunday, Jesus, entering Jerusalem mounted on a donkey, shows that he is the one sent by God. God’s mystery is surprising and disarming. Can we not affirm that the mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus is already experienced in his relationship with the little ones? Jesus looks on them, loves them, listens to them. He loves them because they lack all the appearances with which we adorn ourselves. They are the “human person” themselves, in all simplicity and dignity.

These simple persons, these little ones are without cunning. Jesus affirms that they are the first to hear the Good News because their simplicity, their lack of façade for appearance’s sake, draws them to God’s heart. Their poverty keeps them from self-pride, from being haughty or pretentious and makes them sensitive to the words and parables of Jesus. In this way of life with the littlest, Jesus shows us the true face of God. In some way, without a real encounter with

the poor, I cannot truly know that God is the Father of Jesus, that God is our Father.

Along the path to the poor, Monsieur Vincent had the joy of experiencing in this very place, that to live with a people (children, young people, women and men marked by pain and burden) is the source of the blossoming of each vocation.

On 2 May 1612 Monsieur Vincent took up his assignment as Pastor of Clichy. It was the first time in 15 years that he found himself among these decent and simple country people. He was 31 years old!

I discovered joy in being pastor of such a people ... I had such good people who were so obedient in carrying out all that I asked them to do that when I told them that they should go to Confession on the first Sunday of the month, they never failed to go. They came to me and went to Confession and I saw from day to day how it profited these souls. This afforded me so much consolation and I was so happy about it that I used to say to myself: "How happy you are to have such good people!" And I used to add: "I think the Pope himself is not as happy as a parish priest in the midst of such kindhearted folk." (Coste, Conferences to the DCs, 27 July 1653)

In following Christ, as St. Vincent would do, let us ask God Our Father in this Eucharist to give us perseverance, courage and patience in our encounters with those wounded by life. Let us generously give ourselves, and through the little ones of the world, God will offer us his kindness and blessing. "Let us come toward Jesus; he knows the burden of our mission, our service and our lives."

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

Presentation of the AIC

by Patricia P. de Nava
AIC International President
18.VII.2002

1. Definition

The AIC is an association of whom the majority are women. It was inspired by their founder, Vincent de Paul, who was the first to officially confide the important role of service of the poorest of the poor to women.

In more than 50 countries, thanks to local teams of volunteers, the AIC is working in solidarity and proximity with the most abandoned so they can become agents of their own development as well as that of their communities.

In a special way, the AIC accompanies women in their promotion and search for autonomy. The AIC opposes injustices and puts pressure on structures, as well as persons with power, to fight against the causes of poverty.

In order to attain its objective, the AIC fosters the bond and interdependence between local and international levels. In civil organizations, it participates in a worldwide network that tries to combine and link the efforts of public and private organizations that are involved in the fight against poverty and exclusion so as to defend the rights of the poorest of the poor.

2. Vision

The AIC offers its service to:

- Be a transforming force in society and to fight against poverty;
- Have a priority commitment to women throughout the world;
- Strengthen involvement with the poor;
- Foster collaboration and networking and, conscious of everyone's responsibility, participate in public political activities.

3. Values

Ethical values, in light of the gospel, inspire its activity. Above all, the AIC works to promote justice, equality, a place in society, tolerance, respect and dignity of the person and the right to participate in his or her own destiny.

4. Strategic Objective

To act together against poverty and its causes

This is a commitment to put the lines of action into practice:

- To be a transforming force in the face of poverty;
- To be a transforming force in society;
- To be a transforming force in the Association.

In imitation of St. Vincent de Paul, the AIC fosters working together with the poor in concrete projects to fight poverty and its causes and to defend their rights.

5. The essential principles that animate the AIC are:

- To work together to fight poverty and injustice;
- To consider the human being as a whole person;
- To respect his or her cultural identity;
- To consider, as a priority, promotion of the human person;
- To know the economic, political, social and religious realities of each community or group.

*The AIC commits us to be prophets, to give witness,
to announce and to denounce!*

These criteria lead the volunteers of AIC to:

- Assure the Vincentian presence in the world, preserving their own identity and giving witness;
- Be present as a crucial force proclaiming Christian, ethical and social values;
- Be present as a prophetic force giving a religious dimension to human and civil actions;
- Permeate these actions with evangelical values.

The AIC establishes networks to create projects that can transform the lives of the poor, such as:

- Housing for single women in Cologne, Germany;
- Service for people in the terminal stages of AIDS in Madrid, Spain;
- A house for people who are terminally ill in Mexico;
- A community development and savings project in Payatas (Philippines).

The AIC is enthusiastically working on the campaign: “The Fight Against Hunger: The Globalization of Charity.” This is a common project within the principal branches of the Vincentian Family in many countries throughout the world.

6. The strength of the AIC:

- Does not flow from our resources, which are often limited, but rather from the Christian, ethical and moral strength of our questioning;
- Comes, above all, from the influence that this has in the lives of the poor and in the transformation of their lives;
- Our Vincentian charism is distinctive and enables us to be closer to the poor, our brothers and sisters.

Unity is our strength

The “World Decade for the Eradication of Poverty,” promoted by the UN, asks that various types of collaboration and networks be developed seeking the same goal. The projects will be more effective if we collaborate:

- With other branches of the Vincentian Family, especially the Priests of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity,
- With other associations and groups,
- With people at the local, national and international levels,
- With businesses and institutions,
- With mass media.

United, we can respond to the cries of the poor and, with them, improve the quality of their lives.

7. Considerations

Examination of the Association

a. The AIC and its revitalization process

Every association and every group that desires to survive over time and have an impact on society must carry out a continuous process of:

- Reflection,
- Analysis,
- Evaluation,
- Planning and suggestions.

Through an ongoing effort, the AIC constantly undergoes various processes of innovation and renovation.

b. Innovation

Those in charge, as well as volunteers, foster creativity and inventiveness. This can be seen within the innovative lines of action and documents that are developed. The advances made in relation to utilization and means of social communication are invaluable.

c. Ongoing renewal

The AIC is in an ongoing phase of renewal. It has undertaken a process of **Institutional Strengthening** in order to renew its methods of adapting to current needs and the evolution of poverty.

d. Growth

Thanks to the support from the Priests of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity throughout these last years, the AIC has implanted itself in several countries, especially those suffering many difficulties, such as in Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe. One example is its expansion to Cuba, where we currently have more than 12 groups. Just as importantly is the creation of AIC groups in countries where Catholics are in a minority, such as Japan.

The AIC is in a continuous process of dialogue, analysis, reflection and action. We believe that the association has renewed itself:

- Thanks to the evaluation process that helped us discover the need to renew ourselves;
- Through a serious commitment to put into practice the plans for renewal which came out of the process of institutional strengthening: plans of action, timelines, and new proposals for the function of the leadership committee;
- Through the leaders' encouragement for formation in order to revitalize their foundational project and adapt it to the needs of the poor of today.

e. Phases of renovation for the AIC

- **Awareness:** The AIC fosters among its leaders, as well as among its members, the desire of constantly doing more, the need to evaluate not only the quality, but also the quantity and to examine each of its undertakings.

This idea has not yet been accepted or put into practice by most of the National Associations.

- **Discovery:** brought about through formation:
 - Spiritual and Vincentian;
 - Technical and specific for each type of service given:
 - To defend human rights;
 - To utilize means of social communication;
 - For the promotion and participation of the recipients in forming their own destiny;
 - For understanding and adaptation to different cultures.

- **Creation:** We are trying to renew the structure of AIC, thanks to:
 - An Organizational chart,
 - An institutional document,
 - A plan of action,
 - A list of job descriptions and responsibilities of the Leadership Committee.

- **Contemplation:** We have always had a concern for the spiritual renewal of volunteers in line with the Social Doctrine of the Church.

Updating the main themes of our Founder is a constant worry. One of our greatest challenges consists in finding a fair balance between spiritual and technical formation specific to groups, within a process of continual updating.

f. Principal difficulties

- Renewal of group members;
 - Fewer recruits for our greater commitments;
 - Lack of interest of some Advisors for group process, only giving importance to discussions of spirituality;
 - Lack of a Vincentian Advisor, Priest of the Mission or a sister in a good number of AIC groups;
 - Advisors who carry out their mission more by obedience than by conviction;
 - Lack of participation in planning.
-
- **“Feedback”**

The administration of the AIC comes together four times a year to discuss the problems, successes and failures of the Association. We count on the

presence of our International Advisors who support us in the reflection process.

Most of the AIC groups have monthly, bimonthly or weekly meetings, but many of them do not consistently evaluate their projects, activities and initiatives.

The role of the Advisor is fundamental for “feedback” within AIC groups.

- **Councillor or mentor**

Formation of leaders is one of the most urgent needs of the Association as there exists a great void with the volunteers as well as with the recipients. From this comes the need for formation with the support of the Advisors. This is a priority for the AIC.

- **Leadership**

- The strengthening of leaders will be one of the fundamental and central themes of our next International Assembly.
- Through this strengthening, the AIC tries to dispel questions that create fear in weaker groups.
- Strengthening each agent is indispensable for strengthening society.

Social co-responsibility is a pathway to peace.

The AIC invites us to be a sign of hope and a transforming force in the face of poverty in society!

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

Presentation of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul

by Franck Provence
SSVP-Youth Committee of Paris
18.VII.2002

1. History

“Enfold the world in a network of charity,” such was the ambition of a handful of young men of the Romantic Period. It was the time when Victor Hugo dreamed of turning the page of classical theater, when Chateaubriand pursued his apologetics on Christianity and when the youth of France were in a seething frenzy with ideas and intellectual debates. For the young men of this time, who were rather well read and were arriving from their provinces, discovering the world as they discovered Paris, this hotbed of culture born from the uproar within the university as much as the frequenting of the elite, was obviously exhilarating.

Frederick Ozanam and his friends were no exception to the rule. They, no less than others, had a taste for romantic quarrels and rhetorical jousts, with the exception that they received a Christian education, which perhaps prepared them better than others to measure the vanity of endless struggles, the childishness of literary debates that were rich in ideas at the start, but ended too quickly in defending the idea for the idea, then, when all was said and done, defending the idea for its author. Ozanam was already permeated, from the first years of his adolescence, with questions of the higher realm pertaining to God. It was in this way, first of all, that this group of 19th-century young men contrasted sharply with their generation. Their battle would not be the *Battle of Hernani* but that of defending the faith. And, as action is better than a verbal argument, which can certainly convince but prove nothing, their theater would not be the Comédie Française, but would be the neighborhoods of the poor. “The blessing of the poor is that of God ... Let us go to the poor!” cried Ozanam.

At the start of the turbulent 1830s they were seven young men and only one was older than 20. Distraught by a world that, little by little, renounced Christianity, they came together with the desire to support each other in their faith and to grow together in their faith. But how does one shine forth with only words taken from the gospel while living in a dechristianized society? They quickly saw the need to translate their faith into action.

2. Vincentian Spirit

It was thus that in April 1833, the first Conference of Charity was born. Its principle was simple: a group of young Christian men gathering to pray, reflect and

work together to bring relief to the poor. Quickly the work grew with new members. Soon the group placed themselves under the patronage of St. Vincent de Paul. What could be more natural than to place oneself under the protection of a saint who knew so well how to join prayer and action in fervent charity? St. Vincent de Paul united in his person all the characteristics that should pertain to a Conference: prayer, first of all, because he said, "I can do all things in him who supports and comforts me;" then action, which invites us, through his example and words, to "do more" unceasingly so as to bring relief to the poor, all the poor, without distinction, and in considering again that one must be forgiven for the good that one does for them; finally, by the intellectual concern, which animated Monsieur Vincent in many directions, but always with the desire that humanity grow in goodness. Thus he encouraged better formation for priests; he applied himself to the building of hospices and other works that humanized, after a fashion, the conditions of the poor; he turned his influence of being close to the "greats" of society to, slowly but surely, bring the government, and thus society, to be concerned with the fate of the poor and to provide more relief to them. Finally, Monsieur Vincent was not content to just pray and act alongside the poorest, he also reflected on the causes of the evils of poverty in order to eventually attempt to turn them around.

The Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul had no other ambition than to walk in the steps of their patron: to pray, reflect and act. That is why, throughout the world, groups of Christians come together guided by the founding desire to "serve Christ in the poor." Assembled together in lay communities, the Vincentians have no other ambition than to proclaim the Word of God by their actions and words. Nevertheless, these small communities do not lose sight of the fact that, in order to shine forth from without, joy must reign from within. Friendship towards all and caring for one another, therefore, constitute the foundations of the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul.

3. Growth

It is this spirit that has guided the Society of St. Vincent de Paul from its origins in 1833. First, from a number of seven, the young men quickly gained widespread acceptance. Coming together as lay people to pray together and organize home visits to the poor in their neighborhood, they were joined by a growing number of young men of their age in the first months. Quickly the group numbered about 100 members and the crucial moment had arrived where they had to divide the group. This was the start of the expansion. In creating a second group, the followers of St. Vincent opened a door that would never again be closed. As of 1834, there were numerous Conferences not only in Paris but also in other places in France and Europe and, by 1860, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul had 2,500 Conferences and 50,000 members in many countries.

Today, in 2002, the Conferences number 47,000 throughout the world and bring together more than 600,000 active members in 132 countries on all five continents. If family home visits remain a fundamental activity of the Conference members, it is now complemented by multiple specialized works such as emergency food and lodging assistance and the development of various structures in other areas: schools and hospitals for the poor, retirement homes for the elderly, orphanages, summer camps, etc. For, according to Ozanam, “no work of charity should be foreign to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.”

4. Organization

In all parts of the world, Vincentians work in the same fashion, through small teams of 10 to 20 persons called Conferences, always directed by the laity but, whenever possible, accompanied by a priest or religious. It is in this way that the Conferences express, with regard to the Church, both their desired hierarchical independence and their deep filial attachment.

The Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul are linked together through a vast network that directs the Councils at the regional level (Diocesan and Local Councils), country level (National Councils) and at the global level (International General Council). The fundamental principle of the entire organization is subsidiarity: each hierarchical level has only the competencies that those on the lower level cannot assume. This greatly fosters a spirit of initiative at the levels closest to the needs, especially since the functioning is entirely democratic: Conference presidents are elected by their team members and the presidents in turn elect the members of the Council upon whom they depend. In the same way, all Council members are elected by the representatives in the level directly below, all the way to the General Council.

In every diocese, the Conferences work in direct collaboration with the Church at the parish and various institutional levels. More especially throughout the world, close ties unite the St. Vincent de Paul Conferences with other Vincentian Family organizations, notably the Daughters of Charity, the Congregation of the Mission and the AIC, as well as the Brothers of St. Vincent de Paul. Many activities are accomplished in this close collaboration, and in a harmony which is most often complementary.

5. Current global strategy

Born out of the initiative of some young men, armed simply with their good will, and later built little by little, then expanded by larger groups of volunteers, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul has always functioned with little means of structure. Yet, in recent decades, all charitable associations have felt the need to modernize themselves and to develop their professional administrative abilities in order to

provide more solid support to the work of the volunteers and to organize more efficiently their activity in the service to the poor. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul, for its part, is equipped, in countries where it has the means, with modern and efficient organizational frameworks. On the international level, this evolution is more delayed. The current ambition of the International General Council is therefore to modernize its structure looking forward to “having the Society enter the 21st century.” It wants to assure for the St. Vincent de Paul Conferences a better representation within international organizations (UN, UNESCO, European Union, etc.) on the one hand; but also to provide better service to the National Councils of less-developed countries, supporting them through all means in their development and encouraging especially sharing of all types among Vincentians in developed countries and Vincentians in poorer countries. It also concerns encouraging Vincentians around the world to globally reflect on the causes of poverty, without being content just to bandage the wounds it inflicts. Finally, the General Council would like to give a great thrust towards the development of the formation of Conference members on the Vincentian level (the Vincentian spirit and its most important principles, the knowledge of its principal figures: Vincent de Paul, Frederick Ozanam, Louise de Marillac), as well as the level of Christian fundamentals and, lastly, of understanding poverty under its different aspects.

6. Strengths and weaknesses: perspectives

The situation of the St. Vincent de Paul Conferences today, very different according to country and scope, poses some questions, like all movements, about the future. These questions are principally coming from two recognizable areas: the first is the lack of visibility of the Conference’s activities, not only on the world level, but often on the national and local levels as well. The second is the aging of the members, particularly in Europe, and in a general way in all the countries with older establishments. More and more these concerns are being addressed by an awareness on the part of the National Councils, but for a while now also on the part of the International General Council, which is pursuing the development of an active policy to remedy these shortcomings.

In fact, one must see in these two problems an evolutionary phenomenon that is not irreparable but nevertheless very logical: the lack of visibility of the movement is due to its very type of organization, founded on the principle of subsidiarity, a resolutely modern principle that today inspires all democratic organizations (thus the development of the European Union at present). In this way 47,000 work groups that labor in the whole world each have a great deal of autonomy, that perhaps hinders the cohesiveness of the whole, but above all brings a profound ability for initiative closer to the local reality.

Regarding the problem of aging in countries where the Conferences have been established for a long time, it is, in fact, inherent for older organizations to

need a new breath of fresh air at a given point in time. It is this new breath that the International General Council is currently undertaking to give to the entire St. Vincent de Paul Society, at the same time as it is leading a strategy of movement consolidation, destined, among others, to give it a new visibility.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul has always been young and will continue to be so. When it ages here, it is born elsewhere; and it is reborn here when it runs out of steam elsewhere. It seems that the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul, on the Old Continent where they saw the light of the day and where their deep foundations are engraved, are now moving towards a new dawn filled with promise. For the young men and women of Europe this could be a formidable opportunity. Serving, in friendship, the Church and the poor at the same time, this is what the young people of the new century are not going to miss dreaming about, if they are able to hope. We are already seeing the signs. It is up to us, Vincentians of today, to be capable of welcoming this momentum and of accompanying it into tomorrow.

There is no longer need of a great revolution for this. What suffices is to always have these words of Frederick Ozanam in our hearts: “The first human need, the first need of the Society, are religious ideas: the heart thirsts for the infinite.”

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

JMV in the Third Millennium An Experience of and for Young People

by Gladys Abi-Saïd
International President of JMV
18.VII.2002

JMV, a divine wish becomes an everyday reality...

An experience of young people... An evolution...

It was in 1830, on the rue du Bac, where a story,
a journey began... (the apparitions of the Virgin)
A glance from heaven... (Jesus and Mary)
A listener on earth... (Catherine)
Meditation on the ever-present and living word... (Magnificat)
Acceptance of a mission... (the poor, incarnation of Jesus)
This is what changed the life of many people...
(meetings of committed young people)

1. What is our history? What characterizes us?

“The Children of Mary,” “Marian Youth,” “Vincentian Marian Youth” are three names for the same International Association. The **Vincentian Marian Youth** was born after the apparitions of Mary, in order to create a place where youth in difficulty live, share and are educated. The Association of the Sons and Daughters of Mary is known internationally by the name **Vincentian Marian Youth**. This Association was born thanks to Mary’s desire that was transmitted to St. Catherine Labouré: *I want an Association for the young to be founded ... where I will pour out many graces.*

Catherine Labouré and Jean-Marie Aladel played the role of founders and distributors of the message (like you do today). The first steps were taken by a group in Beaune, in the Diocese of Dijon, after the approbation of the movement by Pope Pius XI allowed the message to be spread throughout the world. By 1999 the Association already existed in 49 countries and the International Statutes* had been approved by Pope John Paul II.

Today, after the first Assembly in Rome in 2000, we have a President and an International Council as well as an International Secretariat in Madrid. Rue du Bac continues to be our place of pilgrimage.

* In *Vincentiana* 43 (1999) 89-97.

JMV affirms its **being** and **doing** within four distinctive characteristics (International Statutes, article 5):

* **Ecclesial:** because the members, from baptism, are to follow Christ and become part of his people, the Church, to commit themselves to live and work, actively and responsibly, in communion with other apostolic forces in the Church, with their pastors, in the dioceses and parishes where they are established.

* **Lay:** because it is an Association mainly composed of young lay people. It is registered with the Pontifical Council for the Laity within the framework of Associations of the Faithful (cf. Canons 298-329). This lay characteristic guides the members to be an active and transforming presence in the midst of the world, particularly among the poor, a setting where building the Kingdom takes place.

* **Marian:** The members of the Association discover Mary in the gospel, as a model for all believers, accepting in faith the presence of God in her Son Jesus and listening to and acting on his word. Likewise, they see in Mary the inspiration that helps them, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to walk through life in faith and with an effective charity that generates justice.

* **Vincentian:** Through its birth in the Family of St. Vincent de Paul, JMV is inspired by the Vincentian charism and makes evangelization and service of the poor distinctive characteristics of its presence in the Church. Its members commit themselves to be missionaries, as a requirement of its own charism, witnessing to the love of Christ by word and work, always ready to exercise their apostolic work among young men and women and among the poorest.

2. What is the present reality of JMV?

We are a young International Association committed to youth, the world, the Church and the poor. Currently there are 150,000 members on four continents:

√ **Europe:** birthplace of the Association, where it first took root. Here the Association has more tradition and experience and also has the challenge of continuing to give life to the Association. It was in Europe that the “post-conciliar renewal” of JMV began and it is present in 10 countries with about 33,000 members.

√ **Africa:** Here the Association is still taking its first steps with very young groups filled with vitality in spite of the situation of poverty and lack of resources. We are in 18 countries with some 6000 members. JMV will soon begin in Chad and Angola.

√ **Asia:** Numerous young communities are full of life. Even though they are limited, they have great devotion to Mary. They are the hope of our Association being present in nine countries having about 16,000 members.

√ **Americas:** Not only a hope for the Church but also for our Association. Here JMV has developed a very interesting common pathway. The members have a Council and their own continental bulletin. They get together once every three years for a meeting-mission. JMV is present in 26 countries with some 20,000 members.

√ **Oceania:** The Association is not yet present on this continent. We are counting on you to establish it, for even if there are other branches of our family present there working effectively, we feel that each branch has its own richness to offer.

So therefore... the things of God emerge: this sprouted, grew, became strong and today some **63 countries** have received the message and plan of Mary. JMV continues to transmit a message that guides, strengthens and makes our baptismal commitment more solid, a commitment that calls us to grow and strengthen our roots.

3. How do we work? What are our hopes? ... (our mission)

The **group or local center** is the basic element that gives life to the charism and spirit of JMV. It is here that we are enlivened, thanks to weekly meetings, and where we invite the youth to follow a process of formation and maturation in the faith, to experience living Christian community, to have a spiritual experience and gradually commit to an apostolic task according to the Vincentian Charism. We live all of this by means of social interaction, retreats and meetings at the diocesan, provincial, regional, national and international levels.

Each group is guided by an adult advisor (normally a Vincentian priest, Daughter of Charity, adult JMV member, or another religious or secular priest). The Advisor is a person that neither walks ahead nor behind, but walks along side the youth, who learns from them and with them, offering them tools and experiences that allow them to be agents of their own history thereby becoming responsible adult Christians.

Each Center has its own **Local Council**, responsible for creatively achieving the four fundamental **goals** of the Association (International Statutes, Article 9):

- Offer a Christian and holistic **formation**, particularly to adolescents and youth — according to the Blessed Virgin's request — so they will

come to live a solid faith in following Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor.

- Promote holistic formation sessions, catechetical classes, congresses, assemblies, publications and other means allowing the young person to grow as a person and as a Christian.
- Living and praying, like Mary, in simplicity and humility taking on the **spirituality of the Magnificat**.

JMV spirituality is characterized by happiness, prayer and **joyfilled celebrations of faith**. Inspired by Mary's song:

- Joyfully living and thanking God for the marvels of his salvation;
- Making a clear option for God, as the only Absolute;
- Placing oneself among the poor and most impoverished, as the means through which we make effective our commitment to God;
- Taking on a lifestyle proper to a member of JMV, expressed through the four characteristic virtues of our Association: humility or a spirit of collaboration, obedience or seeking the will of God, charity or solidarity with the poor, and purity or transparency of life.

Consecration to Christ through Mary as a means to explain our baptismal consecration and to make our lives a total gift to Christ, through service and evangelizing the poor, in choosing Mary as model... occupies a very important place in our spirituality:

- Creating, animating and maintaining the **missionary spirit** within the Association, especially by means of mission experiences, particularly among the poorest and the youth. JMV offers youth the possibility of serving the poor and other young people in their own countries and being in solidarity with them on the continental and international levels. Some most interesting experiences are those of the four permanent missionary communities that JMV Spain has in Bolivia, Honduras, Mozambique and La Linea (Spain) as well as the **popular missions**.
- Forming Association members on the personal as well as community levels so as to **work apostolically** with other pastoral agents, according to the directives of the universal and local Church.

We try to:

- Be a living presence in our parishes and dioceses,
- Work in union with other branches of the Vincentian Family (especially the CM and DC, but also, more and more, with the AIC, AMM, MISEVI. and the SSVdP) on service projects. Currently we

have a common project: *The Globalization of Charity: the Fight Against Hunger*.

- Sowing the seeds of our presence in other areas: youth councils, accompanying youth in difficulty, leisure activities, summer camps, and socio-political projects, etc.

4. How are we organized? What is our administration like?

In order to assure its dynamism and make decisions, the JMV Association works with **Councils** within different organizational lines (center, diocesan, provincial or regional, national and international).

4.1. International Level

- The Director General of the Association is the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity. He exercises this function through the intermediary of a Subdirector General named from the Congregation of the Mission.
- **The General Assembly** is convoked at least every five years and is the highest decision-making organization in JMV. One of its objectives is to elect the International President and the lay members of the International Council from among the young representatives of the different countries. It must also suggest revisions to the Statutes, review the financial status of the Association and promote the spiritual vitality and ministry of the Association.
- The life of the Association is animated at the international level by the **International Council**. This Council is composed of the Director General, the Subdirector General, a General Councillor of the Daughters of Charity, the Lay President and four lay members of the Association elected by the General Assembly. These are the “Major Superiors” (cf. Canon 318) of the Association. The International Council meets several times a year. It is convoked and presided over by the Lay President or, in exceptional cases, the Director General. It meets in order to:
 1. Suggest reflection themes on important aspects of the life and activities of the Association.
 2. Assure communication with and among the National Associations through letters, visits and other means.
 3. Evaluate the carrying out of projects that were approved by the previous General Assembly and prepare for the following General Assembly.

4. Study and approve the preliminary budget and the annual financial balance sheet presented by the International Secretariat.

- Since 1 September 1999, there has been a **International Secretariat** that is located in Madrid (Spain). It is composed of five members whose principal commitment is to form the executive staff of the International Council. Its specific functions consist of: promoting the vitality of the Association, being a link, an avenue of sharing and information between the different National Associations, a means of deepening its own identity, facilitating the means that allow the Association to succeed in its objectives in the different countries. At this time, the members of the International Secretariat are Ana Maria Escaño (Philippines), Gloria Santillán (Mexico), Ivanildo Dantas (Brazil), Fr. Pedro Castillo (Venezuela) and Sr. Asunción García (Spain). They efficiently direct other administrative functions:
 - Communications and maintaining the general archives;
 - Administration and maintaining relations with the Vincentian Family;
 - Follow-up on the commitments from the 1st General Assembly;
 - Animation, formation and expansion of the Association;
 - Develop a monthly international bulletin;
 - Oversee the web site, which serves as a place for all our members to meet, share and receive formation information, and which we invite them to use frequently: www.secretariadojmv.org

4.2. National level

- In each country there is a National Council, composed of a Priest Advisor and a Sister Delegate (normally a Vincentian Priest and a Daughter of Charity), a National President and several lay members.
- The major leadership and decision-making body is the National Assembly that elects the National President and the lay members of the Council. It establishes work models and makes the most important decisions.
- In each country there must be a National Secretariat, or at least a person principally dedicated to the leadership of the Association.
- There are also smaller Councils: Regional or Provincial, Diocesan and Local.

5. What do we seek in the JMV?

- To cultivate interior attitudes, appreciation of silence, creative prayer and in this way integrate Faith-Life;
- To live centered on the Word of God, thanks to personal and community prayer, the Eucharist and the other sacraments;
- To value and promote discernment and spiritual accompaniment;
- To be “contemplatives in action”;
- To live attitudes of simplicity, humility, closeness, respect and listening toward others;
- To undertake the defense of the rights of the most disadvantaged and move forward in fostering justice;
- To involve young people in concrete projects of **service** and **evangelization** that respond to human, social and spiritual attention and development for the least fortunate:
 - Being a presence and support, in collaboration with the different branches of the Vincentian Family, especially the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity;
 - Trying to create Permanent Service Communities, where young people move forward a project in favor of a neglected community, living together for specific periods;
 - Nourishing the adult groups of the Vincentian Family with young people who at their culmination opt to live the Vincentian charism through them: in the consecrated life (as missionaries or sisters) or in the lay option (MISEVI, AIC, SSVdP, or AMM).

There are many service choices in every country:

- a) Catechesis, liturgical animation, visiting the sick, and other lay ministries...
- b) Workshops for disadvantaged groups: women, immigrants, youth with social problems, street children...
- c) Homes for the elderly, help to psychiatric patients, people with drug addiction, prisoners, and school tutors;
- d) Working in marginalized neighborhoods;
- e) Providing support in rural areas.

6. How do we manage financially?

- With monthly, quarterly or annual dues;
- With the constant seeking of funding to help offset the costs of the secretariats, meetings, travel, and formation courses;
- With the financial support of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity on the local, national and international levels;

- With the voluntary help of the young people in the centers and the secretariats.

7. What do we dream?

During the first JMV International Assembly, the young people and the Advisors together dreamed about the future for JMV. In this way we suggested the **challenges** that we assumed as a project and commitment, as a **dream** to realize for each member of the Association and for each JMV **community**. In this third millennium, we would like to:

1. Have youth groups in every country where the Vincentian Family is present;
2. Work together, with other branches of the Vincentian Family in the world, at concrete projects of **evangelization** and the integral human **development** of the poor;
3. Enrich our formation programs more and more so as to respond to the needs and interests of today's young people;
4. Use modern means of communication creatively for the service of the poor and channel our energies in favor of solving the problems of justice and peace;
5. Become an Association that prays with strength and beauty;
6. Be witnesses of love and hope.

We have many dreams in order to cultivate the land that God has confided to us:

1. That we count on the young people who commit themselves to ongoing formation throughout their lives and that each National Council develop a **holistic formation process** that fosters the JMV identity and the importance of young people;
2. That, more and more, the members of JMV exercise an **apostolate with other young people** and that the Association grows through the creation of new groups so that JMV is present in all countries where the Vincentian Family is established;
3. That the members of JMV have a global perspective and that its vision of the world is evermore international. This will allow us to open ourselves to other realities that would enrich us, to share experiences and materials, and to create a single family living globalization in a positive way;
4. That the missionary dimension be encouraged and strengthened in the countries so that we can take on the mission *ad gentes* more readily and rely on available young people who are mobile and willing to offer their services as volunteers where God and the poor have need of them;

5. That, along with other branches of our Vincentian Family, we work on **concrete projects for evangelization** and the integral human **promotion** of the poor in order to be a transforming force;
6. That the members of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity become more and more aware of their role as **advisors, accompaniers** and **formators** of young people and that they open their communities to share the richness of the charism with the new generations.

In order to succeed in achieving these dreams, we ourselves must begin to live in truth and identify more and more with Jesus and his mission.

We must make the Message of Rue du Bac a message for today and tomorrow, not of the past. Today the Virgin confides the responsibility of accompanying young people to each Daughter of Charity as she did to Catherine, and to each Vincentian Missionary as she did to Fr. Aladel.

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

The Association of the Miraculous Medal

*by Charles Shelby, C.M.
International Coordinator of the AMM
18.VII.2002*

1. Purpose of this Presentation

1.1. Clear understanding of the AMM

The first purpose of this presentation is to offer a brief, clear understanding of what the Association of the Miraculous Medal, the AMM, is. Many of you know the AMM as it is organized in your own country. But what is the essence of the AMM? It is simply to wear the Miraculous Medal. Anyone who wears a blessed Miraculous Medal is a member of the AMM. Only God knows the number of members!

1.2. International context

The second purpose of this presentation is to set the AMM in an international context. The AMM is an international association. The Vatican has approved its statutes. In this context of an international association, the AMM is organized in different countries. In an international meeting like this, I will limit my presentation to the international AMM. You are welcome to share informally about the AMM in your country if you wish.

1.3. Vitality of the AMM

The third purpose of this presentation is to assure you that the AMM is alive and well. In the stages of organizational development that are the themes for these presentations on the branches of the Vincentian Family, the AMM is in the midst of a powerful renewal. These are exciting times for us.

1.4. Direction of the AMM

The fourth purpose of this presentation is to glimpse into the future and see what the new directions are for the AMM. Last October, the leaders of the AMM from around the world met in Rome. We produced a set of Convictions and Commitments that set our direction, and we made some requests of the Director General, Fr. Robert Maloney, C.M. One of those requests has led to my presence here today.

2. Short Outline of the AMM

Let us begin with an overview of the AMM. We all know the story of the Miraculous Medal and the apparitions to St. Catherine Labouré. They happened just a few meters from here. As you know, from those apparitions came the Children of Mary, now the Vincentian Marian Youth, or simply Marian Youth. And later the AMM gradually developed.

The AMM is an ecclesial, Marian, Vincentian association of the Christian faithful. However, it is not exclusively a *lay* association. Any member of the Christian faithful may be a member, including the clergy.

There are countless people who wear the Miraculous Medal. According to the statutes approved by the Vatican, *all* of them are members of the AMM. A much more useful concept is the number of members registered in the AMM where it is organized. There are perhaps 7,000,000 members registered in the different countries where the AMM has been established.

The AMM is always engaged in an apostolate. The exact nature of the apostolate varies from country to country.

A Short History of the AMM

a. Paris Association in 1847

I understand that there has been an AMM since 1847, but it was only for Paris. It took over 60 years to establish an international Association of the Miraculous Medal.

b. International Approval by Pius X in 1909

Under statutes approved by Pope Pius X in 1909, the AMM was organized under a Director General and had diocesan directors. Members must be invested by a priest with a medal blessed by a member of the C.M. There were spiritual benefits for membership. Post-Vatican II regulations eliminated the requirement that the priest blessing the medal be a C.M.

c. Minor revisions 1990

At the request of the AMM in Perryville, in order to satisfy a great demand for investiture in the medal, the Vatican approved some two minor revisions to the statutes.

1. First, anyone who wears a medal blessed by a priest is a member. No longer is investiture a condition of membership.
2. Second, investiture was still presented as something desirable, and the 1990 statutes allowed a layperson to lead the investiture using medals previously blessed by a priest.

d. Latest revision approved 1998

In 1997, Fr. Maloney called together six leaders of the AMM to a meeting in Rome. This meeting produced the current version of the statutes, approved in 1998. These statutes launched the renewal of the AMM, as explained below.

Nature of the AMM

After that short history of the AMM, let us speak very quickly on the nature of the AMM.

a. Ecclesial

It is Ecclesial. It is Catholic. Although non-Catholics are free to join, they are outside the jurisdiction of the Church, so we simply cannot say anything about them with respect to our laws or statutes. They belong to the Blessed Mother and are her children, so we cannot prevent her from loving them, and we welcome them into her Association.

Nevertheless, we, the AMM, are Catholic. We support and love our Church. It is the context in which we live as an association.

b. Marian

The AMM is Marian. Mary is the origin of the AMM. Mary is the route of the AMM to Christ. She is our example in prayer and action.

c. Vincentian

The AMM is Vincentian, and this is a fascinating reality. It is no accident that Mary gave the Miraculous Medal to a Daughter of Charity and entrusted its promotion to a member of the Congregation of the Mission. Mary gave the Miraculous Medal to the world for the poor, the suffering of the whole world and especially France, who were without hope, like sheep without a shepherd. Mary sees Christ in all her children, especially the poor. Through the AMM, Mary continues to reach out to her poor children with her motherly love. What could be more Vincentian!

d. Not Exclusively Lay

The AMM is an association of the Christian faithful. As such, it can include clergy and religious. Although most members are lay, it is not *exclusively* lay.

Size of the AMM

a. General Members are countless

This is a brief discussion of the size of the AMM. Since anyone who wears the Medal is a member, there is no way to count the number of members. It is the only association of the Christian faithful without a register of members. The statutes call these unregistered people “general members.” Clearly the AMM is the largest association in the Church.

b. Particular Members, perhaps 1-7 million, depending

“Particular members” are registered locally in the association. This number is more possible to count, but still difficult, because there are many registers. Here are some numbers. The list is not exhaustive, but they add up to somewhere between one and seven million.

In the USA, the AMM in Perryville has 2 million “members” listed on its rosters, but these might be called affiliates, rather than members, since they are not personally active in the apostolate of the AMM. About 350,000 are on the active roster and participate in the apostolate. These could clearly be called active members. The AMM in Philadelphia has similar numbers — about 2,000,000 members who could be called affiliates, and about 350,000 participating members.

I apologize if I am not accurate with the remaining numbers because I have not heard them officially. In Spain, I believe there are about 2,000,000 family members who participate in the home-visit apostolate. These could be called members, since the parish centers register them. If there are four people in each family, then there are perhaps 15,000 in leadership, and they would be more active in the association.

I will give one more example, because they are very numerous. I think the Philippines have about 1,000,000 in their roster of affiliates. They also have parish centers like Spain, and that would add to the number of members there.

Apostolate of the AMM

The AMM has a number of apostolates beyond its primary mission of bringing the message of Mary conceived without sin to the world. Here are three examples.

a. Home Visit

A statue of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal moves each day of the month around a circle of 30 families. The family prayer ceremony includes greeting, devotional prayers, and farewell. There may also be instruction in the Christian life. This is primarily an apostolate to and for the family, but it also collects funds to assist the poor.

b. Charity for the poor

Secondly, national statutes determine how the money collected in the association may be used. Often it is for the poor of the parish, or it may benefit the poor elsewhere. Many AMM projects are done in collaboration with the Vincentian Family. Of course, a portion of the AMM funds also supports the operation of the association.

c. Assist the C.M. ministries and missions

Finally, in many areas, the AMM receives significant donations used to support the missions of the Congregation of the Mission or a province's ministries with the poor and the clergy. This often includes support of seminarians in formation and of infirm or retired members of the province.

3. Renewal of the AMM

3.1. Foundation — First International Statutes of the AMM

In preparation for this presentation, the speakers were given an outline of the five stages in the life of an organization. They are foundation, expansion, stabilization, breakthrough, and transition-renewal.

The first stage is foundation, and for the AMM, this stage can be summed up by our first international statutes.

a. Structure of AMM in the First Statutes

The AMM officially began with its statutes of 1909. These statutes seem to envision the AMM as something like a parish sodality. It stated that the purpose of the association was the sanctification of the members and participation in an unspecified apostolate.

b. Role of the Director General

In the AMM, the statutes have always placed the highest leadership in a Director General, who is the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity. Originally, there were no specific duties, but he was the ultimate authority for the entire AMM.

c. Diocesan Structure

The 1909 statutes envisioned a diocesan director, appointed by the bishop, and responsible for the association, canonically erected in the diocese by the bishop. In each diocese, the AMM could have its own “spirit, laws, and customs.”

3.2. Expansion — National Differences

The second stage in the life of an organization is its expansion. After the original statutes were promulgated, the AMM was able to expand around the world. The first expansion was very rapid. During its time of expansion, the AMM developed national differences. Here are the most significant examples.

a. France

The AMM in France was the original, even before the statutes of 1909. It now has the missions of the Congregation of the Mission in France as its apostolate. The chapel here in Paris is the center of prayer for the AMM in France.

b. Spain

In Spain the AMM began in 1911. It is centered in the parish, renewing the family and assisting the poor.

c. USA

In the early years, the AMM was founded at two places in the USA, corresponding to the two provinces of the CM in that nation. The first foundation was at Philadelphia in 1915, called the “Central Association of the Miraculous Medal,” and located on the east coast. The second was at Perryville in 1918, and it is called the “Association of the Miraculous Medal,” located in the center of the country. This is an accident of history and, to my knowledge, has no logical explanation.

Both groups are very similar, enrolling members throughout the country at the choice of the member. As their principal apostolate, they support the province of the Congregation of the Mission where their offices are located.

d. Mexico

The AMM in Mexico was founded in 1925 as a union of the associations in several dioceses. Like Spain, it is centered in the parish, with apostolates engaged in renewing the family and assisting the poor. It also has a strong catechetical character.

e. Philippines

A Spanish Vincentian who was educated in the United States established the AMM in the Philippines in 1957. This association combines features from the AMM in both Spain and USA.

f. Elsewhere

That is not the end of the expansion. These are just some of the earliest or largest examples. The AMM has been founded in many other areas and countries. Usually it has spread from Spain or follows the model of the AMM in Spain.

3.3. Stabilization — Some Growth, Few Changes

Stabilization is the third stage in the life of an organization. After the AMM was established in a country, it settled into a stable pattern. Numbers increased gradually. There was little innovation necessary since the AMM was accomplishing its purpose as described in its statutes.

In the stable AMM, people were concerned with their own sanctification, and they participated in the apostolate of the AMM in their country. This period of stabilization lasted through Vatican Council II to 1997. The AMM never experienced a significant decline. This is not surprising since the Virgin Mary is in charge.

4. Breakthrough — Meeting in Rome, December 1997*

a. Share who we are, history, mission

The breakthrough in the renewal of the AMM was quiet, but to those of us who were there, it was an exciting and historic event. The Director General called together six leaders of the AMM from France, Spain, the USA, Mexico, and the Philippines. Our first task was to get to know each other and share the stories and reality of the AMM that we were leading. It was overwhelming to see how Mary had reached out to her children so effectively in so many different ways. Our differences could not hide the common themes, shared values, and real sense of mission we held in common. There was no jealousy, only a celebration of the good work all of us were doing for the gospel, the Church, and

* In *Vincentiana* 42 (1998) 24-29.

the poor. This was truly a moment of grace.

b. Examine statutes

Our second task was to examine the International Statutes and determine whether we should propose any revisions. Providentially, there was a canon lawyer among us, and someone who could write reports and documents. Much to the delight of the Director General, we emerged from our meeting with a polished set of new International Statutes in Latin, English, and Spanish — ready for approval by the Vatican.

*New International Statutes Approved February 1998**

1. Laid the Foundation for Renewal of the AMM

The newly approved International Statutes made three very important developments that are the foundation of the renewal of the AMM. They are certainly the most important result of the breakthrough meeting of December 1997, and set the stage for all the new developments in the AMM.

2. “Essential” Document

The first thing to understand about the new statutes is that they are an “essential document.” They only say what is necessary. They do not impose significant limitations on the local association. They are meant to provide as much freedom as possible to achieve the purpose of the AMM. Because they carry Vatican approval, they should not go into such detail that they need to be revised frequently. There are other ways to specify particular details when they are necessary, ways that allow for easy change with different circumstances.

3. Provided for Particular Statutes

The most radical change to emerge in the International Statutes is that they provide for particular statutes in the places where the AMM is organized. In one simple statement, this provision is able to unite the AMM wherever in the world it is organized into one association. It brings us all together. It gives us all a single spokesperson for our international mission. At the same time, the Particular Statutes assure that everywhere the AMM will be able to carry out its particular mission affirmed by the approval of the statutes, and free from interference from above or below.

4. Affirmed the Reality and Value of Inculturation

The combination of an essential document and the provision for particular statutes has a wonderful effect. On the one hand, it recognizes that the AMM is really different in different parts of the world. And on the other hand, it recognizes that such differences are good, because they allow the AMM to operate effectively in the concrete reality of each country. The lesson of history, from when the AMM had no international structure, is that it does not have to be identical everywhere as long as it is true to the purpose in the International Statutes — in whatever way it can be true to that purpose. I believe that this is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the AMM in the Vincentian Family.

* In *Vincentiana* 42 (1998) 79-82.

c. Consider collaboration

Our third task was to consider possible ways to collaborate. This was by far the most difficult task, since there was — and never had been — an international structure. We did not see the need for a complex centralized organization, but we recommended a secretariat to encourage communication, correspond with the different countries, and serve as a center for approving new particular statutes. Since the Director General already had a crowded schedule, this work fell immediately onto the shoulders of the newly named Vincentian Family Delegate, Fr. Benjamín Romo, one of the participants in our 1997 meeting.

3.5. Transition — Renewal

Emergence of Coordination

The final stage of renewal of an organization is the transition to the renewed form of the organization. This takes us into the present and the future, as I promised when I began. For the AMM, this phase has two areas that I would like to share with you. The first is particular statutes, which are the entry into the renewed AMM and the means by which it is organized. The second is what came from our international encounter last October.

4. The Expansion of Renewal

4.1. Particular Statutes

Time does not allow me to go deeply into the issue of particular statutes. However, it is important that you understand how they are at least as essential to the mission of the AMM as the International Statutes.

4.2. Purpose of Particular Statutes

The purpose of particular statutes is to define the AMM in a specific location and to adapt it to the local culture and society. In this way, the AMM becomes a living, acting force for the gospel and the poor.

a. Value of Particular Statutes

Particular statutes are valuable for three reasons. First, they are the unifying link that aligns the AMM in a country with the international AMM. Second, they can meet the civil requirements for an association or organization in a particular country. Third, they create the local structures and organization that allows the AMM to function effectively in a given place and culture.

b. Other Rules or Bylaws

Particular statutes do not need to say everything. In fact, it is best if, in their own way, they are an “essential” document that leaves as many specific points as possible to local rules or bylaws that can be changed without recourse to the Director General. Such rules are strictly

internal. *How* the rules are created and *how* they are revised is something for the particular statutes to determine.

5. The First International Encounter, October 2001

Coming from 28 countries on five continents, 70 leaders of the Association of the Miraculous Medal met in Rome for our first international encounter last October. Note that our statutes do not provide for an *assembly*; however, we can have an *encounter* or meeting.

That wonderful week provided the first real opportunity for the leaders of the AMM around the world to come together and experience real sharing, discovery, and affirmation of the good work God is doing in our midst. It led to a series of convictions and commitments, which you can find in the book published after the encounter, *Asociación de la Medalla Milagrosa: Una nueva Imagen para un nuevo Milenio*. There were also five recommendations to the Director General. The most important for us are the requests for an international organization, formation materials, and an information bulletin. A very brief outline of the encounter and the Final Document can be found in *Vincentiana*.*

6. The Period after the Encounter

6.1. New status in the Vincentian Family

It has been only eight months since the encounter. Because of the encounter, our place as AMM within the Vincentian Family has become clearer. We are the largest organization in the Vincentian Family. We in the AMM realize the wealth to be found in our diversity as together we work toward our common mission. We have a renewed dedication to serve the abandoned poor in the spirit of St. Vincent, and we recognize that this mission comes to us from the Virgin Mary, who herself was poor and served the poor in her life. With the rest of the Vincentian Family, we seek greater formation resources. We are quite at home here in this encounter, Vincentian Month 2002.

6.2. International Coordinator

The Director General was “creative to infinity” in responding to the requests of the AMM International Encounter. He recently named an “International Coordinator” to serve as his delegate in carrying out the function of Director General. The Director General added a “Coordinating Council” to assist his delegate. In this way he suddenly formed the “international structure” that was requested of him. Since he put me in that position, I now come before you to give this presentation. The task of the International Coordinator is not a full-time job.

* *Vincentiana* 45 (2001) 472-478.

7. The Future

7.1. Communication

I have been the International Coordinator for less than three weeks. You are the witnesses to the birth of a new service. Nothing is ready yet; everything is just beginning to be planned. Since this job is not full-time, I must still maintain my primary mission at the AMM in Perryville, Missouri, USA. A few things will emerge in the next few months, and I hope there will be something of value to the AMM everywhere by the start of 2003.

The first task of the International Coordinator is communication in the AMM. In order to communicate to the AMM as widely and as quickly as possible, much of this task of the International Coordinator will be done electronically. The Internet is a fast and inexpensive way to communicate. Personal communication can easily occur through email. General communication can be done through a web site.

a. General Features of the Web Site

The web site will be in English, French, and Spanish. It will include a calendar of events and a document resource library. I will begin work on the web site when I return from the Vincentian Month. It usually takes a few months to launch a web site.

b. Electronic Newsletter

In order to reach the AMM everywhere in the world as quickly and easily as possible, the international bulletin will be part of the web site. It will be quarterly. There will be messages from the Director General and the International Coordinator, features on the AMM in the different countries, announcements submitted by the countries, and links to new formation materials on the site.

c. Practical Assistance for Leaders

The web site will also have information to help the AMM leaders serve their members. Besides the documents resource library, there will be a section of formation materials of whatever kind we can gather. And there will be materials to help in the development of new groups of the AMM in the countries where it is not established or not fully organized.

7.2. Formation

a. Sharing of existing materials

There are AMM formation materials available in different places. I hope to be able to gather them in a form that I can publish on the web site and, in that

way, make them available as widely possible. As a service, I hope to prepare translations of the materials in the three languages of the site. Collecting and translating the existing formation materials will itself add to our supply of formation materials.

There are also formation materials in the other branches of the Vincentian Family. With their permission, we can adopt them in the AMM and adapt them to our unique mission. In a similar way, our own materials may be useful to the other branches of the Vincentian Family.

b. Development of new materials

As time passes, new materials will appear. If I learn about them, I can post them on the web site for everyone. And if there are enough requests for a particular type of material, I can serve as a contact point for the request.

7.3. Collaboration

a. Networking

I hope to add a section to the web site where leaders can sign in and carry out interactive discussions. This would also be a way to show interest in some new formation topic. If enough leaders want a resource, someone may be willing to produce it.

I know from my own experience that leaders are busy people. Email will be a simple way to communicate. And I can use email to send announcements and reminders occasionally. My style is to send a simple message and refer to a page on the web site for full information, available when it is convenient.

b. How can we work together?

Collaboration means working together. I want to work with the leaders of the AMM and meet their needs so they can meet their members' needs. Please contact me with your ideas and hopes. We can discuss them together and work together to make our dreams become a reality.

My job title is "International Coordinator." The words do not mean that I do everything. Rather, I work to bring together people and resources so the Virgin Mary's work can be done. The AMM is an association of us all. To borrow an expression, together we can do more than we can ever do separately.

That is a brief glimpse into the future of the International AMM. I hope you find it as interesting and exciting as I do. Thank you for your attention.

Lay Vincentian Missionariess (MISEVI)

*by Eva Villar
International President of MISEVI
and Felipe Nieto, C.M.
International Team MISEVI
18.VII.2002*

MISEVI is the youngest member of the Vincentian Family. It is the most recent, but also the smallest and is still taking its first steps. We all have our eyes fixed on it because we are hoping for great things for the poor of this world. It is a little overwhelming to try and present it before this assembly as the International Coordinating Team is well aware of its successes and failures. They know that it is affectionately protected by all the other branches of the Vincentian Family, but is lacking in experience. They know its origins, identity, goals, and its structure and that it strives to accomplish its tasks and address the challenges that the General Assembly confided to it. It is from this beginning that I speak to you now.

1. A Little History

At the dawn of the Millennium there was the first International Assembly of MISEVI at Los Molinos (Madrid); an event for the JMV who saw their dream become reality: international level coordination of an Association born out of the missionary interest of some young people who were very concerned with missionary experience. Let us not go too fast. We are going to try to present MISEVI to you.

It all began in 1984. The JMV had such a strong missionary desire that a group of Spanish youth had some missionary experiences *ad gentes* during vacation months. Since then we have tried to send an average of 30 young people temporarily. Three years later, in 1987, some of these young people began to stay on the missions for several years as laity, with their commitments renewable every two years, and devote themselves to various pastoral works with the Vincentian Family. Beginning in 1992, some of the young people expressed their desire to seek an alternative that would help them continue to follow their option for the mission as laity with some stability and bonds with the Vincentian Family.

From that moment on the idea that the experience of missionary life could not be reduced to a phase of youth, but rather, could be a stable form of living the lay vocation was affirmed. This discovery had to find ways of being sustained and continuing into the future. There were many consultations, dialogues and

meetings and, little by little, the idea came: create an association in the Vincentian Family that would sustain, help, support and provide coordination of the presence and work of the laity in the missions *ad gentes*.

MISEVI truly began to function during a missionary session in El Cisne on 18 October 1997. There, young people committed themselves to work for the Association so that it could take charge of coordinating the laity that were already on the missions for two years — to support them on the human, spiritual and economic levels. During this meeting, we named an Administration Committee that immediately began working on the first task: preparing the First General Assembly of MISEVI.

It is also necessary to speak about the first steps of MISEVI in new countries: the Dominican Republic, Italy, Honduras ... all of this, thanks to the Spanish-American JMV meetings every three years, and making the first points of contact and collaboration with MISEVI International.

The first General Assembly was an important moment in the life of the Association. We clarified identity, set up some lines of action for the future, appointed a Coordinating Team, developed a Final Document and contacted the various entities that were already functioning. All of this bore fruit in a truly international MISEVI.

For this entire process, we want to stress the valuable help and unconditional support of Fr. Robert Maloney, successor to Vincent de Paul. His presence, welcome, encouragement and advice have succeeded in setting up a juridical structure for the Association so as to extend the Vincentian Family in the world.

2. Identity

MISEVI is an international association, canonically erected as a public association of the faithful, as an entirely autonomous juridical person, seeking to develop an organized presence of laity in missionary works *ad gentes*, especially within the missions of the Vincentian Family.

We can find its principal identifying characteristics in its documents, but also in the formation process and the little “struggles” with the process of expansion in which we find ourselves. To that effect, the following identifying characteristics are clear and well defined:

- It is a lay association: by baptism we were chosen by God and invited to accept salvation. Each one of us has the opportunity to assess (cf., Lk 1:34-35) and choose this call from God who lives in us (1 Pt 1:23) in

establishing an intimate communion with Christ so as to be filled with him and commit ourselves to the building of the Kingdom.

- Its primary goal is to animate the “missionary” and to develop, by encouraging, supporting and coordinating, the presence and missionary work of the laity in the missions *ad gentes*.
- It is united to the Vincentian Family, to its charism and its spirituality. At each moment it seeks contact and collaboration on the local as well as on the international level.
- It is a “second” membership: the members of MISEVI continue to belong to their Vincentian associations of origin, and they are the ones who send them to the missions.
- It has its own spirituality: centered on Jesus Christ, we make the choice of the mission among the poorest, beginning with insertion in the community and with a specific personal plan.

3. Goal

Among all the documents, presentations, commentaries and suggestions along the way, the best way of expressing the true goal of MISEVI is to say: we want to encourage, facilitate, sustain and help coordinate the presence of the missionary work of Vincentian laity and their reinsertion into their place of origin after the missionary work. In accomplishing the actions indicated in the second paragraph of our Statutes, we propose these means to attain our objective, the presence and work of lay Vincentians in the missionary field:

3.1. To encourage:

- a) the participation of the members of MISEVI in the missionary activities carried out by the various Vincentian and Church associations, especially those at the local level, both at the place of origin of those sent to the missions and the places of their missionary service;
- b) the creation of activities that seek to awaken or develop a lay missionary vocation in the various Vincentian associations.

3.2. To facilitate development of the missionary dimension

- a) By being a channel for the meeting between lay Vincentians who have a missionary vocation and the missions *ad gentes* confided to or animated by the Vincentian Family;

- b) By collaborating with Vincentian Associations in the formation of lay Vincentians preparing to go to the mission *ad gentes*;
- c) By seeking to establish contacts between persons or small groups who are beginning to develop their missionary life with Vincentian Associations having more experience;
- c) By bringing together all programs and means of formation in order to diffuse them among all the associations of the Vincentian Family in the different countries, trying to foster a spirit of welcome, collaboration and mutual support at the concrete moment of planning this formation

3.3. To sustain: Our desire is to sustain each of the members, who, according to different life choices, are part of the association; to sustain the communities where they are inserted, the associations of origin that sent them, as well as other Vincentian associations. It is always necessary to look for new ways of support and to be creative in this, but in the least, we would like to offer:

- Human support
- Moral support
- Spiritual support
- Economic support

3.4. To coordinate:

- a) By being a means of coordination of all the lay missionaries, contacting them, inviting them, and welcoming those who desire to participate in the Association and offering support to those who are part of the Vincentian Family but decide not to participate in the Association;
- b) By sending information to the members of the various ongoing missionary communities about the projects and activities of other communities where members of the Association work;
- c) By sustaining the active participation of its members within the coordinating structures of the Vincentian Family that is present in the mission places or by encouraging them to create them where they do not exist.

4. Structure

4.1. Members:

MISEVI is a Vincentian Association of **secondary membership**. This means that it is open to all lay Vincentians in order to deeply live out the specific nature of a missionary from within his or her own charism while

wanting to grow in the missionary dimension without severing membership to the Vincentian Association of origin.

Taking into account this special characteristic, MISEVI has established four types of membership:

- **Members with full rights:** lay Vincentians who have spent two or more years in the mission and renew their commitment to the association every three years;
- **Honorary members:** ex-members with full rights with more than five years of not being reincorporated in the mission and who support MISEVI from within their current situation;
- **Members in formation:** youth or adults from various Vincentian Associations preparing to be sent or are in their period of mission presence and want to learn about MISEVI in view of becoming part of it;
- **Collaborative members:** all who wish to cooperate with MISEVI through commitments of prayer, service, economic contributions, etc.

4.2. The Coordinating Team

The Coordinating Team has the management responsibility of the Association. They are the “Senior Officials” of the Association on the international level (cf. Canon 318). They act in accord with the Statutes, the internal law, the Spirituality Document and the directives from the General Assemblies. In a particular way, the team must take care of pastoral and community plan of the missionary communities. The team is composed of the President, three lay members, a Daughter of Charity, a Priest of the Congregation of the Mission and two representatives from lay associations of the Vincentian Family having members in MISEVI. At least three of them must reside in a place close to the permanent Secretariat.

The President is chosen by the General Assembly by secret vote of the members with full rights. There must be an absolute majority on the first two ballots; if no person wins, there is a third ballot for the two who have obtained the most votes. The one to be elected is the one obtaining the most votes (cf. Canon 119). The election of the President is confirmed by the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity. The role of the President includes:

- Animate and coordinate the life of the Association;
- Represent the Association in civil and ecclesiastical situations;
- Convoke meetings of the Coordinating team and prepare the agenda;

- Determine the distribution of tasks of the secretary, treasurer and council within the Coordinating Team after consulting the members of the team;
- Maintain contacts with and accompany missionary communities;
- Maintain relationships with other branches of the Vincentian Family and other missionary movements;
- Seek contact with close family members of those who are sent;
- Follow up the reintegration of members returning from the missions.

The Coordinating Team takes on the functions of secretary, treasurer and councilors, according to the decision of the President.

The Coordinating Team generally meets at least three times a year. The President convokes the meetings and sets the agenda. There must be two-thirds of the members present at the first meeting and half at the second.

After having presented the chosen candidates, the General Assembly names, by three successive votes, three lay members for the Coordinating Team. All members with full rights in the Association or any member of the General Assembly can be elected.

The Priest of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughter of Charity are named by the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity. The two representatives of the Vincentian Associations are named by their own members according to the indications of the Coordinating Team.

All members of the Coordinating Team are elected or named for four years and their terms can be renewed for a maximum of two other terms. The time dedicated to this service will not be counted toward losing the condition of a member with full rights. The duration of terms of the Daughter of Charity and the Priest of the Congregation of the Mission will be flexible. They will be adapted to the times fixed for other coordination roles that they might hold in the Vincentian Family, with a maximum of 12 consecutive years.

4.3. The General Assembly

The organization of MISEVI is established around the General Assembly, as the supreme authority in participation and governance of the Association. This takes place every four years to revise the workings of the association, give direction on the plan of action for the future and study the balance sheets and budgets.

The Coordinating Team convokes the General Assembly and the following assist at it:

- Ex-officio: the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity and the members of the Coordinating Team;
- Elected: a missionary with full rights who represents those working in each missionary region or diocese;
- Elected: once the results of the previous elections are known, five members with full rights are chosen among those from a single college composed of all members with full rights who have not been previously elected;
- Elected: a representative of honorary members, another of the collaborative members and another of the members in formation.

5. Projects

All MISEVI's projects for 2002 are small steps to achieve the general objective of this Association that was created to sustain, help, support and provide coordination of the lay presence and work in the missions *ad gentes* confided to or animated by the Vincentian Family.

The MISEVI Coordinating Team, elected at the First MISEVI General Assembly in January 2001, suggested that during the period 2001-2004, they work to convert the challenges of the Final Document from the First Assembly into reality. The plan of this year, 2002, is a stage of this journey.

5.1. To deepen, apply and make known the important documents of MISEVI

- We believe that the Spirituality Document is a basic tool for announcing, living and celebrating the gospel on the personal and community levels. For this, a simple edition of the Spirituality Document is coming out and soon we will have a wide distribution among the members of the Association, as well as others interested in the missionary theme.
- We are in the process of revising the Internal Law. We already have edited the 5th text that includes the latest consultations and it will be sent soon to the participants of the First International Assembly to be

voted upon and definitively approved. We hope to be able to publish and distribute it at the beginning of November 2002.

- We have decided that the rich contents of the First Assembly presentations could be deepened. We want to reflect on them in order to concretize them, accept them and diffuse them as catechesis. With this in mind, we are in the process of working on a methodology and of looking for collaborators who can work in making them more catechetical.

5.2. To be creative and spread the spirit of MISEVI, to foster the necessary drive so that, in tune internationally, we will open doors to new realities and facilitate the incorporation of new members.

- Little by little we are going to make contact with leaders of National and International branches of the Vincentian Family. Sometimes, despite these means, this communication is slow and responses are slow in coming, but we do not lose contact.
- We know that communication between countries is important and necessary so we have also created a web site. This includes a section on formation that we try to update frequently and we are hoping to present it in several languages. For this reason, we created a forum section, but it is used little. Sometimes it is faster and more convenient to send the information directly by e-mail to those who are interested.
- We maintain regular e-mail correspondence with the various countries where MISEVI is emerging in order to accompany their progress: Ireland, Taiwan, USA, Italy, Mexico, Columbia, Chili, Santo Domingo, Argentina, Mozambique, and the Philippines. We are in the process of doing all we can to enter into communication with South Africa and Indonesia.
- We want to reinforce the presence of MISEVI through communication, especially with Vincentians.

5.3. To seek to create a solid, stable structure that promotes sustaining the social funds that are required for the retirement and cases of illness of our missionaries.

- On this point, we are only working with the missionaries who belong to MISEVI Spain and with offers from a national plan. We have studied several possibilities for this and have chosen to create an

individual savings plan for each missionary with more than five years of service on the mission. We are looking for different possibilities to supply this fund, beginning with commitments from relatives, friends and interested parties.

5.4. To facilitate and channel means of formation

- A commission of the Team was charged with creating a draft copy that has already been presented. During this year we want to do a broad consultation of members with full rights for some corrections and additions and to approve the definitive Plan of Formation. It remains to resolve the study of how to diffuse it and implement it.
- We have also put various articles on our web site that can be used for formation, reflection and dialogue. One can give an opinion of these in the forum section on the MISEVI web site.

6. Conclusion

MISEVI was born small but it has been called to become great. On the table of each team meeting, but especially in our hearts, there are three words that are the hope and dream for all of us: **formation, expansion and consolidation**. There are two and a half years ahead of us to get there.

This is like the mustard seed. It requires a lot of care, time, devotion, work and effort for it to grow. May it become a little tree where all lay Vincentian missionaries, those past and future, those now and always, can find good branches where they can build their nests and feel that they have roots and protection. There is need of support at all levels along the way as well as the generous dedication of some to accompany all with much enthusiasm, as if it were a dream that we all believe will some day come true.

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

Evolution of Charity

by Patricia P. de Nava

International President of the AIC

16.VII.2002

Down through the centuries, we Vincentians have been given the task to lead the project of our Founder in such a way that the gospel spirit of charity becomes a reality in the world. St. Vincent drew his inspiration from the imitation of Christ, whom he preached and he went far in his love for all, especially the lowly, the weak, and the poor. Today this precept is alive and active in the Vincentian Family, but times have changed, society has been subjected to a great evolution. That is why, we, the various branches of the Vincentian Family, are questioning how to transform our methods of intervening so as to better respond in an evangelical spirit of charity. Charity, as Vincentians understand it, is always the same for its essence includes transcendent values and unchanging universality. It is linked to mercy and solidarity, attentive listening to the cries of the poor, fighting to defend their rights and against injustice. All of these ideas have been present for over 400 years within a process of holistic liberation for the poorest.

When speaking of the evolution of charity, we allude to a manner of doing it by searching for new roads adapted to the realities and challenges coming forth from today's world. This journey is long and will never be completed. What is needed is an ongoing process of reflection, analysis, dialogue and action, always trying to live out faithfully the teachings of Jesus Christ in inventive and creative ways, as St. Vincent did in his time.

This evolution is in direct relationship to a consistent process by those who commit to live charity as well as by those who are the recipients; that is, those who are the poorest, our lords and masters. Today's poor are not yesterday's poor. We must listen to them in order to respond to their needs, requests, demands and to the complex situation of poverty that is increasing more and more in spite of the efforts of many.

Throughout this day of work, we are going to ask ourselves about our own responses to the cries of the poor, greatly linked to the evolution of various poverties and the reality of the poorest. Next, I am going to refer to the lived out experience of our Association.

The AIC has travelled a road riddled with hope, challenges and difficulties, but it has been invaluable for it as been our road, filled with deep analysis and awareness of realities. This road that is ours is part of another that is even longer

and wider, having different aspects that we have followed, sometimes on the side, sometimes following behind, other times pointing out the way, with other branches of the Vincentian Family, especially the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity.

I am going to try to lead you along the route that led the AIC to new conquests and to propose new objectives, through an analysis of innovative ideas that sprang up from the experience of volunteers within a country or the documents of large international organizations or the Church. We will deepen and study these ideas from the viewpoint of the fundamental project of St. Vincent.

From assistance to participation

When a new social culture began to move about in the world, we asked ourselves if the practical assistance up to now, having often forgotten the teachings of our Founder, corresponded to the needs of the poor or if their dignity required new forms of assistance. This is how we began to see that assistance, when it was not justified by the extreme conditions of the recipient, could even be negative. This had already been determined by St. Vincent, but we had forgotten it.

Journey towards promotion

In every circumstance, unjustified assistance must be replaced by promoting the person. It is indispensable to enter into a dynamic authentic solidarity, to “put on the shoes of the poor,” **taking them as the departure and arrival points of our action.**

This “worldwide” conviction, we could say, gave way to projects to promote persons, such as centers for professional development, schools, literacy programs, etc. We felt that these projects implied the participation of the recipients, but they, in most instances, were simply recipients of the educational process. Many times these initiatives, while positive, did not achieve the desired results as nothing changed, or very little changed in the everyday life and specifics of the recipients. Women learned to sew but they did not have any opportunity for work, they did not even have the possibility of buying the first materials to make clothing for their children.

Self-advancement among the poorest: a total change of mentality

An important development occurred in the mid 80s when numerous Latin-American Associations began talking about “self-advancement.” They maintained that the poor should be helped to become agents of their own

promotion and their own destiny. AIC International went deeper into this idea and the more AIC developed it the more AIC saw its innovative value. But to undertake this new road in order to collaborate in its success for the self-promotion of the poor, we had to update our entire way of being and acting, improve the contents of our usual formation and learn new communication techniques to improve and perfect our sense of solidarity. All of the preceding was an indispensable beginning in order to give the poor the possibility of self-advancement and participation in the various initiatives intended to improve effectively their quality of life individually as well as for their family and community.

Deepening and taking on the process of self-advancement of the poor was not an easy task, especially since this required a true change of mentality for us. We had to abandon the feeling of self-satisfaction that gives birth to a feeling of gratitude regarding the recipients, sometimes even humiliation. We also had to avoid all paternalistic overtones, which are deeply rooted in volunteers. We had to decide to go to a second or third plan and give the poorest the opportunity to determine their own route, at the risk of being wrong. This road did not always respond to our expectations, nor to what our “preparation” and “experience” told us. It was difficult to allow them to build their own destiny, which in our thinking was clear and obvious.

AIC self-advancement groups

This is how the face of the Association began to change in many countries. Self-advancement groups began to appear, made up of volunteers coming from within the community itself. These new groups, at this time, became one of the main interests of the leaders of the Association. It was very impressive to see young volunteers, in a marginalized neighborhood in Lima, collaborate with other members of the community in order to feed 600 children, among whom were some of their own children. They established four dining rooms in their own homes. Some of the homes were made of corrugated tin and cardboard. They not only promoted the development of the children but the entire community.

A great challenge for us was also noting that the volunteers in Cameroon were getting up at 4 o'clock in the morning to go work in the fields. After selling the produce they had cultivated, they would feed their families and pay for little services that had been provided to families poorer than themselves.

The AIC takes on defending the rights of the poor

From this journey alongside the poorest arose a new experience that prompted requests from the recipients in the self-management projects. AIC listened to the

call of the poorest and took upon itself the need to deepen its knowledge of the UN's Declaration of Human Rights. This document asserts the right to suitable living conditions for human beings and the right of all to participate in the life of the community. Therefore, we became convinced that extreme poverty was not an inevitable evil that one must overcome without fighting against it. We began to look at it as a violation of the most basic of human rights, as a form of social exclusion that is not to be accepted with passive resignation without running the risk of becoming accomplices to injustice.

With this firm conviction we developed volunteers in numerous countries to defend and promote human rights. We organized children and adult workshops on human rights as well as specific workshops for women. These workshops were sometimes directed towards the volunteers themselves and society in general. Later they were adapted to the needs of the recipients. We have made an important step thanks to this formation of the poorest in defending their rights.

For example, in the town of San Luis Potosí, Mexico, after having participated in one of these workshops, a 13-year-old girl realized that her stepfather did not have the right to have an intimate relationship with her and asked the help of a volunteer in order to go and report this to Child Protective Services. From that point on her life was changed as well as the life of her mother and her little brothers who had gained greater awareness of what was acceptable and what to expect regarding their rights.

Awareness of a person's inalienable right to food, suitable lodging and, in general, to a life with dignity was critical during a time of developing numerous projects and contributed to improving the quality of life of the recipients.

Towards a culture of solidarity and self-advancement

Following this, we clearly saw that our traditional works close to the poor, without doubting their validity, were insufficient. For the good of the poor, we also needed to denounce injustices, make cultures and the ruling mentality sensitive to needs and apply pressure on structures. That is, we needed to have the courage to undertake a path that was unknown up to this point and to act within environments that were far from our traditional activities. We needed to become a voice, sometimes uncomfortable, in order to question society and make it more aware, more in solidarity and respectful of the rights of the poor. With this goal, we became committed to spread the culture of solidarity and self-advancement. In the years that followed, the AIC came to the conclusion that in order to spread a new culture and transform mentalities, it also needed to communicate these new values and reinforce existing values in relation to service, such as gratitude.

To illustrate this type of action I am going to give the example of a community in Germany where there was a group of people who were very poor, living in shipping containers. Immediately the community was against this and the people logically reacted in an aggressive manner. We tried to help them in various ways but always failed. Then a different strategy was envisioned and we began working to sensitize the society to their needs. Little by little, the community became aware of the problem and their attitude towards the poor changed. We came together to support them, taking the necessary steps to obtain educational vouchers for the children, finding work for some of them as well as various services and benefits through the local government. Currently these two groups are living together peacefully and have even taken the first steps in establishing an environment of mutual support.

The importance of networking

When the United Nations proclaimed the worldwide program to eradicate poverty, the AIC felt called. From its origins, it has followed the great teaching of St. Vincent, “work together against poverty.” Therefore, the Association could not fail to participate in this worldwide program and making this idea its own.

The idea of “acting together,” which also became part of the UN program, required a greater commitment from the Vincentian Volunteer in order to move forward with others and thereby achieve greater impact in a fight of such dimensions. At that time, we began to consider it very important to approach the Vincentian Family. The members of this large Family all have the same identity, follow the same goals and can set out their activities according to the various charisms that are identified within each group. If we work together we can gather immense strength for the good of the poor and society. But this is still not enough. The AIC is equally committed to participating in the actions promoted by the various forums or association networks sharing the same objectives. It is important to network in order to fight against poverty and communicate to society, and the authorities in power, an awareness of the debt of justice that society has towards the poor.

Participation in the initiatives of large international organizations

We have sought different means to augment the presence of the AIC in national and international organizations. The AIC has representatives in various organizations, such as UNESCO, ECOSOC (Economic and Social Council — UN) and the European Council, among others, and we have begun to intensify our participation through selected representation at all events that interest us because of their repercussion on the lives of the poor. These interventions were very valuable and continue to be so despite the discrimination that can exist in certain cases, given it is a Catholic organization. They take our opinions into

account at the conclusion of numerous international events. One very clear example is the intervention of the AIC at the time of the World Summit for housing, “Habitat II.” The AIC was chosen as spokesperson for a group of international associations through its participation with more than 2000 testimonies handwritten by the poor who are affected by housing problems.

Empowerment: to believe that the poor can develop and affirm their abilities

Currently, we are trying to take a very important step in going even further in the concept of participation in order to achieve in the poor the potential of their capabilities, self-esteem, ability for reflection and work and of course, to continue the process in seeking their independence and liberation. This is what we know today as “empowerment.”

Work in the form of projects

Currently at all levels, in governmental as well as non-governmental organizations, Catholic or non-Catholic, we give fundamental importance to **work in the form of projects**. Thanks to a specific methodology and to numerous studies carried out in this regard, this type of work has been very much encouraged at the heart of the AIC through different documents, always trying to put into practice the dynamism of Vincent de Paul, constantly taking his orientation into account.

Of course, in his time, St. Vincent did not use the term project because the term is current to today. We have some very clear examples, nevertheless, that show us that before carrying out an action, he would analyze it in depth, examining it within the reality of the recipients, taking into account, not only their needs, but also their sensitivity. For St. Vincent it was something natural, for he himself experienced the wounded pride of being poor and being given no consideration as a person.

Vincent planned each action for assistance step by step before beginning it. We notice this, for example, when he explained to the “Ladies” of his day how to visit the sick poor (SV XIII, 423). Each contact with the poor was for him an act of love, a sacrament. In the same way, we see how he tried to give it expression in all his actions. The rule of the first foundation “already contains the seeds of all that will subsequently characterize his charitable and social activity, that is, the criteria necessary for all works. We see in this his sense of observation and organization, his particular respect for the poor person and the concern that the poor be always in charge of their own promotion. Evidently Monsieur

Vincent wanted these ladies to understand that the sick poor have the right to the same care and consideration as the great ones of society.”¹

The need to fight together against poverty and injustice, holistic attention due a human being, respect for his/her cultural identity, concern for his/her promotion in knowing the economic, political, social and religious realities of each community or group, are the essential principles that can be safeguarded when, in place of carrying out actions without adequate planning, one develops a project based on these principles.

We have noticed that in countries where they are already working with this method, the services have been strengthened and are more effective and lasting. They can be organized in other countries through sharing experiences. When these projects are presented in writing, they are credible and economic aid is much easier to obtain at the local, national and international levels.

The “work in the form of projects” is a method of formation that necessarily involves carrying out new actions, but is also an invaluable guide that can help us evaluate and restructure some existing actions. Some of these actions have continued for years in the same form, **without taking into account the transformations that the today’s continuously changing world situation demands of us**. In formulating and presenting a project and following the different steps that orient us by various criteria, we enter into a process of constant revision and updating by which our actions become more efficient and creative.

I am not going to do an exhaustive analysis and even less, a course about how to use this methodology. That is not the intent of those who organized this meeting. I am only going to analyze two fundamental aspects.

- The conception of a project
- The essential criteria for the development of a project

Concept of project

In general, when we speak about projects, we understand them to be “developing actions directed toward the socio-economic expansion of the population concerned”; however, this is not always the case. There can be projects whose primary objectives are evangelization, holistic formation, formation of volunteers and others, etc.

It concerns:

¹ “Au temps de St-Vincent de Paul... et aujourd’hui,” Vincentian Animation Team.

- A program of action resulting from an analysis of poverty;
- Actions adapted to needs specified by the recipients;
- Actions taken up at various stages;
- According to a continuously updated intervention strategy;
- To obtain a development objective;
- With a determined cost.

It is necessary to underline that for us, in general, the recipients are always the poorest and it is to them that we must always adapt our methods. Consequently, we must, according to a process of genuine solidarity, “put on the shoes of the poor” **taking them as the departure and arrival points of our action.**

We always try to carry out projects in accord with our lines of planning. These lines, which we evaluate and analyze every four years, assist us in creating projects, in keeping with their criteria:

- that give primary importance to **complete formation** of individuals and communities;
- that are conducive to and **promote various forms of communication, contributing to positive relationships;**
- that foster **respect for human rights**, rights of women, rights of minority groups, immigrants, the sick and the marginalized of society;
- that include **the adequate use of the mass media** to expose forms of poverty, like St. Vincent did in his day, and to protect the truth of the information;
- that facilitate **self-advancement of individuals and communities**, avoiding paternalism and unwarranted assistance, that, even though this fosters appreciation (highly valued by many), also brings about humiliation and in many cases, generates apathy and conformism;
- that **manifest true solidarity**, which is not content with the pleasure of giving, but carefully and with great objectivity evaluates the importance of the action;
- where **prevention** occupies a fundamental role;
- where **denunciation and putting pressure on structures** contribute in an effective way to eradicate the causes of poverty;
- with the clear conviction that at the present time it is impossible to work alone and that **it is necessary to become part of a network** and collaborate with other organizations who have among their objectives the fight against poverty and the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth, sharing with us the same objectives of fighting against injustice and manipulation.

We cannot forget that all projects involve a process of evaluation, which could suppose making essential changes, and includes, renouncing projects that

do not achieve their objectives. We see that *St. Vincent was not limited to institutions or specializations. He spontaneously accepted the reality of the poor as it was. He was ready to modify plans, projects and structures in order to adapt them to the reality of the poor and to their circumstances.*²

Conclusion

Throughout this process, the AIC understood that it must be a crucial and prophetic presence in society, that it must promote the human, social and religious values that are the foundation of its action. Thus, in such a way, it will become a multiplying agent of the Good News. Above all, the AIC understood that society, the world, must be transformed and that we must commit ourselves to be a transforming force. In order to succeed, we must transform ourselves, our mentality, our world of work with the poor and our commitment within society and culture. If the campaign “The Fight Against Hunger: The Globalization of Charity” moves from projects of assistance to actions to denounce and to pressure systems, it can be a very clear example of these types of initiatives. Group Advisors must know their process and their lines of action in order to be able to guide groups in this direction. That is why it is important that the Advisor not be content to have a discussion about spirituality but that he or she participate with the group to analyze its actions and follow up with an evaluation, not only of the actions but also of the group process. It is also important that the Advisors be aware that the laity have gone through a process of change and adaptation and that they must encourage and stimulate them so that they become mature, committed laity, aware of the growing importance of their role in today’s Church.

Later, we are going to speak about the specific role of the Advisor. I will not, therefore, develop this topic. I would only like to allude to the necessity of counting on Advisors adapted to the needs of the laity with whom they work and of the fundamental importance of their role in this process of self-management and “empowerment” that we would like reach as laity as much as the recipients of our action.

In this “unending journey,” it is necessary to have a change in mentality on the part of the Advisors so they can adapt themselves and listen to the, sometimes imperceptible, cries of those whom they animate.

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

² *Ibid.*

Unifying Elements in the Vincentian Family

*by Benjamín Romo, C.M.
Delegate to the Vincentian Family
19.VII.2002*

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.

Homily in the Chapel of the Rue du Bac

Readings: 1 Kings 19:9-14; Matthew 8:23-27

by Michael McCullagh, C.M.
Province of Ireland
18.VII.2002

Many years ago there was the song called “The Sound of Silence.” It begins with the lines:

*Hello darkness, my old friend. I've come to talk with you again.
Because a vision softly creeping, left its seeds while I was sleeping
And the vision that was planted in my brain
Still remains, within the sounds of silence.*

In the silence of sleep and dreams, St. Catherine Labouré experienced visions and from those visions came sounds or voices which have enriched our Vincentian Family and the Church since the mid-19th century.

Today, I would like to share with you those sounds of silence, the sounds of contemplative silence which have enriched us all.

Silence can take many forms. At its most negative it is tense where you could cut the air. At other times we have anticipatory silence as before any great performance; a respectful silence as we await a special guest; a silence which is compassionate in the home of the bereaved; an embarrassed silence when careless or angry words are spoken to another in public; the forever silence which follows the death of a loved one. Finally there is contemplative silence, that silence which produces sounds which speak of hope, of reassurance, of serenity, a silence which nurtures a prophetic voice. This is the silence we associate with holy places like Lourdes, Rue du Bac, Fain-les-Moutiers, Château l'Evêque or Dax. It is also the silence of holy people like St. Catherine Labouré.

The first sound of contemplative silence for St. Catherine Labouré was the sound of presence, a tangible, communicating presence of the Eucharistic Lord at her First Holy Communion and, later, during daily Mass, a sound which replaced the numbing sound of loneliness in the death of her mother, and the feeling of isolation as a visionary, in her community life.

The next sounds for Catherine were actual human voices, the voice of St. Vincent telling her in her dream to follow him in ministering to the poor, and the

voice of Mary, the conversational voice, the voice of reassurance for the Double Family of Vincent and for the world.

On this very day in 1830 Catherine heard the sound of Mary's voice from contemplative silence: "My child, the good God wishes to entrust you with a mission." Catherine, as we know, achieved this mission for the family of Vincent, Louise and Frederick Ozanam and for the Church. This is what we celebrate today.

William Wordsworth speaks of thoughts too deep for words. These are the thoughts which beautiful landscapes convey. He simply paints the picture and we hear the silent sounds within us. It is likewise for Catherine as she conveys to us images too deep for words, like her vision of St. Vincent's heart and her image of the medal. The heart of Vincent in its varying colours calls us by name and indeed speaks sounds which we can only hear in contemplation, the call to innocence, the call to charity and the call to accept the crosses which come our way. The image of the medal, revealed in absolute contemplative silence, once more brings us thoughts too deep for words. Yet, how many thoughts found expression in sounds of gratitude and words of praise from people like Ratisbonne, John Henry Newman, Frederick Ozanam and others whose lives were touched by the medal.

In our first reading today Elijah hears Yahweh in the sound of a gentle breeze. Fr. René Laurentin prefers to describe this as the "voice of a gentle silence." From this gentle silence Elijah heard a voice of strength to support him in his prophecy. In the third and final apparition in December 1830, Our Lady said to Catherine: "You will not see me anymore but you will hear my voice during your prayers." This was the reassuring voice of Mary heard in contemplative silence which, like Elijah, gave Catherine strength through days of difficulty with Fr. Aladel, the days of the commune and persecution — a prophetic voice which became the bridge between Good Friday and Easter Sunday in the life of the Double Family of Vincent and Louise — it was a prophetic voice strengthened finally in her vision of the triumph of the cross.

The Gospel today portrays the Church with the waves breaking over the bows of the boat. The apostles fear that they are going down. Just as the Lord was awoken from sleep and spoke words which brought reassurance to his apostles, so Catherine, in the time of political upheaval and persecution, the time when the Community in Rue de Sèvres had only 14 old men, was awoken from her sleep to encounter Mary, and from that moment spoke words of serenity in the midst of personal suffering and words of hope in the midst of persecution.

Today, we need to hear new sounds, new voices in a milieu of contemplative silence. "Too much do we ask for what we want; and not enough for what the

good Lord wants,” Catherine once said to a companion. Today we have an opportunity to listen to the many voices of Catherine, voices of serenity when community life is trying, voices of presence in prayer, and voices of hope and reassurance in the midst of dwindling numbers. In our gathering our prayer will be that we might hear these voices in the places and spaces which, for Catherine, were places and spaces of contemplative silence.

For St. Vincent every resolution was to be single, precise, definite and possible. He would say of Louise that, whenever she found herself alone, she was in contemplative prayer. Vincent might simply be asking us to take such a resolution — be people of contemplative silence every time we are alone.

In this Chapel of the Apparitions may we be sustained and strengthened by the sounds which become contemplative silence.

Some Qualities of a Good Formator

by Robert P. Maloney, C.M.
Superior General
9.VII.2002

I. The Changing Context and some Challenging Contemporary Calls

Much has changed since St. Vincent's time, but the call for help in formation is as persistent today as it was in his day. If anything, it is even more so. In recent years I have heard no call more frequently. These appeals have their own contemporary flavor. Significant modern day factors have given them a new context and content.

1. The expanding Church in Asia, Africa, and Latin America and the need for well-prepared formators

During the pontificate of Paul VI, the face of the Church changed significantly. For the first time, she found the majority of her members living in the southern hemisphere. At the dawn of the third millennium, the areas of her most rapid growth are in Asia, Africa and Latin America. This is what Walbert Bühlmann calls "the coming of the third Church."¹ It was really only in the 20th century, as Karl Rahner often pointed out, that the Catholic Church became a "world-Church."²

The many letters that cross my desk include numerous appeals from the southern hemisphere for help in formation. Bishops and provincial superiors write that, even more than lacking financial resources, they lack well-trained, mature personnel for forming lay ministers, sisters, and priests. Sometimes they plea eloquently: "If you could only help us for five to ten years, while we form our formators, the future will be well prepared!"

2. A renewed interest in the "Vincentian Family"

Over the last seven years the many groups that share in the charism of

¹Walbert Bühlmann, *The Future of the Church* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1986) 4-5; cf., W. Bühlmann, *The Coming of the Third Church* (Slough, England: St. Paul Publications, 1976).

²Karl Rahner, "The Abiding Significance of the Second Vatican Council," in *Theological Investigations* XX, 90-102; cf. also "The Future of the Church and the Church of the Future," in *Theological Investigations* XX, 103-14; cf. also, "Aspects of European Theology" in *Theological Investigations* XXI, 83.

Vincent de Paul have become increasingly conscious of being members of a “family.” From the international to the local level, we have begun to meet much more frequently, to collaborate in projects among the poor, to pray with one another, and to discuss others ways in which we can be more closely united, while preserving the distinctive characteristics of each group. In this context, the call for mutual assistance in formation has rung out loud and clear.

At their meetings in 1999, 2000, 2001, and 2002 the heads of some of the principal branches of the Vincentian Family spoke of a number of formation projects:

- a. a book that would articulate the foundation stones of Vincentian spirituality as lived out by lay men and women and would concretize these from the experience of the laity;
- b. the use of Internet as a formation tool;
- c. a document prepared by AIC for the spiritual advisors of their groups, one of whose principal roles is formation;
- d. the preparation of a similar document for the spiritual advisors of JMV, which you will be discussing in these days;
- e. this meeting here in Paris for the spiritual advisors of our lay groups.

Few calls are as loud as the call for formation coming from the various branches of our family: AIC, the Daughters of Charity, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, the youth groups, the Miraculous Medal Association, and many others.

3. The rapid growth of the Vincentian Marian Youth groups

These groups now number about 75,000 members on all the continents. The spread of the groups in recent years has been striking. On February 2, 1999, the Holy See approved the first set of International Statutes for the JMV. In August of 2000, in Rome, they held their first General Assembly, with delegates coming from 46 countries.

In some countries, such as Spain, these groups have a very well developed formation program. Other countries are struggling to create one. But on all sides, the call for formation is eloquent.

One of the offshoots of the JMV has been MISEVI, whose International Statutes were approved by the Holy See on April 7, 1999. MISEVI prepares lay

Vincentian missionaries for work in the missions *ad gentes*. It offers them formation, an apostolic placement, a community setting, spiritual and material support, and assistance in reinsertion into their homeland upon their return from the mission. As is evident, the initial and ongoing formation of its members is a new and considerable challenge. It held its first General Assembly in January of 2001 with the participation of 70 persons coming from 16 countries.

4. Changes in methodology

Today we emphasize a new methodology that is adapted to the person of the oppressed,³ where the educator and those being educated learn mutually, where teachers not only evangelize but are evangelized by the poor. Contemporary documents note that persons must not only be the *objects* of formation, they must be *subjects* within the formation process.

Today too we speak of the need to assist the poor in “self-promotion.” The *Final Document* from the recent General Assembly of Delegates for AIC, held in Querétaro, Mexico, November 17-23, 1998, speaks of assisting others “to become multiplying agents” of actions aimed at transforming social structures.

Finally, papal documents in recent years have continually highlighted the need for inculturation. A deepened understanding of anthropology and of the values and disvalues within the various cultures that interface with the gospels allows Christianity not only to purify cultures by performing its prophetic role in denouncing the evil that has roots therein, but also to be enriched by cultures, finding new ways in which genuine human and Christian values can be expressed.

II. Ten Characteristics of a Good Formator Today

Let me begin with a brief citation from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians:⁴

Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. All of us, gazing with unveiled face on the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image....

Paul marvels at the work of the Holy Spirit who transforms believers into the image of Christ, who himself is the image of the Father. This fundamental grace of the New Covenant is offered to us not only in baptism, but again and

³Cf. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970).

⁴2 Cor 3:17-18.

again throughout our lives. We are called to continued conversion to the Lord, to ongoing formation in Christ. Moved by grace, we lay ourselves open to God's work of transformation. We make ready a dwelling place for the Lord in our hearts, so that he might transform us. It is this openness to transformation that we call "formation."

Let me suggest ten characteristics of the good formator today.

1. *Deeply rooted in the person of Jesus*

This seems so obvious, but there is nothing more important. In our context, all formation leads toward "putting on the Lord Jesus Christ."⁵ The formator must not simply know *about* Christ; he must have personal experience of the Lord himself. It is only the person who is genuinely filled with the Spirit of the Lord who is able to communicate that Spirit to others. A good formator breathes in and breathes out the Spirit of the Lord.

2. *Fully immersed in the Vincentian charism*

St. Vincent has given us a wonderful gift. The charism of the Vincentian Family remains strikingly relevant today as the forms of poverty multiply and the gap between the rich and the poor grows continually wider. The formator must know Vincent himself, the history of the branches of the Family he or she accompanies, their spirituality, their mission, their works, their concrete and effective love for the poor. It is these elements especially that the formation process aims at transmitting to future servants of the poor.

3. *In contact with the world of the poor*

If we are to form others and lead them to a fuller participation in evangelizing the poor, we must ourselves know the poor and their world. The good formator has been evangelized by the poor. She has experiential knowledge of the most abandoned. She has heard their stories and been shaped by them. His or her personal experience of the Lord is not an abstract one; rather, the good formator knows Christ especially as he reveals himself in the person of the poor.

These first three characteristics might seem immediately evident, but they are too important to be presupposed. The good formator must know Christ, must know St. Vincent, must know the poor.

4. *Capable of being a guide on the spiritual journey*

Not everyone who makes the spiritual journey is a good guide. A guide

⁵Rom 13:14.

needs experience and training to sharpen his natural gifts. He knows the paths wayfarers tread in the course of the journey: the high roads, the low roads, the pitfalls, the traps. Good guides have fallen and risen many times. They know how to reanimate those who are discouraged and to temper with experienced counsel the impatience of the overzealous. The best guides walk *with* those they are forming, at times quickening the pace, at times slowing it down, at times pausing for rest.

5. *A good listener*

St. Vincent would be quick to say that every formator must be humble. Is there any virtue about which he talked more frequently? The wise formator reaps before he sows. He listens to the needs of those in the formation process. He allows himself to be evangelized and changed by them. Many a good formator has found himself saying: "I think I got more out of teaching this course than my students did!" One hopes that both students and formators are mutually transformed in the process.

6. *A good communicator, skilled in using contemporary means for engaging others in the formation process*

After listening, the formator must also speak. Her language, however, need not be exclusively verbal, especially today. In a visual age, it is very important that the formator use modern means of communication. Such means engage the various senses of the students and draw them more fully into the learning process. Today films, music, computer presentations, Internet and a variety of other audio-visual aids are ready at hand for the formator.

Pedagogy is both a science and an art. It is crucial that we engage the formees themselves in the learning process so that they become active agents in their own formation. They themselves, after all, have the primary responsibility for their own formation. One hopes that they become "multiplying agents," able to pass on to others the gifts that they have received. In order to achieve these goals, the good formator must know how to work not just with individuals, but with groups. He must be able to stimulate the formees to help one another in the formation process.

7. *Knowledgeable about the social teaching of the Church*

A few years ago I wrote an article on this subject.⁶ While the Church has proclaimed her social teaching eloquently for more than 100 years, it remains

⁶Cf. "Ten Foundational Principles in the Social Teaching of the Church" in *Echoes of the Company* N° 4 (April 1999) 129-137.

largely unknown for many, even most, believers. This social teaching has particular importance for our Vincentian Family, since it focuses especially on the most needy. In fact, it is the foundation for the Church's "preferential option for the poor." I suggest that all Vincentian formation programs should impart a healthy dose of this teaching. It should be well-packaged, so that students can learn it and then transmit it to others.

8. *Capable of relating and working as a member of a team and of cooperating with others as a team member.*

In our Vincentian Family we are called to serve not simply as individuals, but as members of a Family. Especially when we work at formation, it is essential that formators represent and in some ways "sacramentalize" the family spirit and capacity for team work they seek to hand on, rather than projecting themselves as individuals.

They should be capable of working with other formators of our lay groups, standing at their side, being at their service, promoting their gifts, multiplying formation agents among them. Teamwork is essential.

9. *In touch with the various groups in our Vincentian Family*

These groups have a common heritage but at the same time distinctive charisms. It is important that we appreciate both the common and the distinctive elements within our family tradition. As a Family, we have a long healthy history in this regard with much cooperation among the members of the Congregation of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity, AIC (formerly the Ladies of Charity), the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, the Miraculous Medal Association, the Vincentian Marian Youth groups and, most recently, MISEVI. Besides these, many other groups share in our tradition. In recent years we have had increasing contact with the Religious of St. Vincent de Paul, the Federation of Sisters of Charity in France, Germany, Austria, Italy, and India, the Charity Federation in the United States, and numerous others.

10. *Truly missionary*

The mission-oriented formator has a global point of view. He knows that beyond the surrounding mountains lie other towns and villages where the gospel must be preached. He knows, as he views the ocean, that its waves break on other continents, on other shores, where the poor also live and labor. St. Vincent himself, in an age where travel was difficult and communication was limited, looked beyond France both to the East and the West and to the North and the South. By the time of his death, his family was already quite international. Today, with rapid transportation and almost instantaneous communication, it is

even more imperative that our formation process draws us toward a global vision. Even as I speak, it is heartening to see how quickly members of our family in distant countries are responding to the campaign against hunger.

St. Vincent was a wonderful formator. People gathered around him eagerly and were captivated by the vision he communicated. My hope is that we, his followers, can revitalize our formation ministry in his spirit.

Like St. Vincent, the good formator today teaches much more by his witness than by his words, much more by his life than by his lessons, much more by his person than by his plans. The good formator is able to articulate deep rootedness in God and deep rootedness in the sufferings of the poor. He is able to connect the soul of the Vincentian Family with the soul of the world. He is able to express a creative, contemporary sense of our charism in shifting, complex, contemporary circumstances. He is able to look painful reality in the face and communicate hope at the same time. He is able to draw wisdom out of our tradition and express it in an updated, concrete way. He is able to stare at data that is sometimes depressing and find patterns for a promising future. Like St. Vincent, he is able to draw others to believe deeply and enthusiastically and to make their belief real through concrete, effective, practical charity.

Louise de Marillac **Animator of the Confraternities of Charity**

by Elisabeth Charpy, D.C.
Province of Northern France
19.VII.2002

In 1625, when Vincent de Paul accepted the spiritual direction of Mademoiselle Le Gras, born Louise de Marillac, could he imagine the place she would take in his life? I do not think so, for during this time she appeared to him as a worried and scrupulous woman. Mademoiselle Le Gras needed to meet with her spiritual director often. She did not handle well his absences from Paris. This woman had a painful past: she did not know who her mother was, the de Marillac family had marginalized this illegitimately-born child; Louise later married even though she wanted to become a religious; from December 1625, she was a widow with the responsibility of a 12 year-old child.

It would take Monsieur Vincent several years to discover the true personality of Louise de Marillac. She had been distressed by the illness and death of her husband, believing that God was punishing her for not having been faithful to the promise she made to become a religious. But, little by little, she would once again find balance. Vincent counselled her and involved her in working for the poor. Then, as time went on, he saw the depth of the spiritual life of his directee, her ease of contact with those she met, her kindness and also her quick understanding of situations as well as her sense of organization.

1. First commitment

In May 1629, Vincent de Paul made a request of Louise de Marillac. Would she accept going to Montmirail to visit the Confraternities of Charity established in that town and the neighboring villages? This request left Louise completely free in her response:

Father de Gondi sent me word to come by coach to see him in Montmirail. [...] Do you feel like coming, Mademoiselle? If so, you would have to leave next Wednesday on the coach to Châlons [...] And we shall have the happiness of seeing you in Montmirail.¹

After a short reflection, Louise acquiesced to the request of her director. With her son boarding at the School of St. Nicholas du Chardonnet, her time was her own. Was Monsieur Vincent aware that Louise would accept a commitment

¹ Coste, Vol. 1, Letter 38 - To Saint Louise, April-May 1629, p. 63.

that would take her far, very far? Probably, for it was truly a “sending on Mission” that he addressed to her for her journey.

*I am sending you the letters and the report that you need for your journey.
Go, therefore, Mademoiselle, go in the name of Our Lord.
I pray that His Divine Goodness may accompany you,
Be your consolation along the way,
Your shade against the heat of the sun,
Your shelter in rain and cold,
Your soft bed in your weariness,
Your strength in your toil,
And, finally, that He may bring you back in perfect health and filled with good works.²*

Following this first journey, Vincent asked Louise de Marillac to visit the different Confraternities of Charity established in the Ile de France region around Paris, but also Confraternities a bit further away like Montmirail. A study of Vincent de Paul’s letters to Louise de Marillac indicates that from this date forward the tone of the letters changes. The terms used were no longer “my daughter,” but “Mademoiselle.” Vincent no longer addresses her as a directee but as a collaborator. Louise became the Visitatrice of the Confraternities of Charity.

2. Visits to the Confraternities of Charity

Louise was 38 years of age when Vincent de Paul chose her as his collaborator for the work of the Confraternities of Charity. A petit, energetic and quick woman, Louise was never in good health but this would not deter her from travelling. As often as possible, it was Monsieur Vincent who sent her or he communicated the requests of the Ladies of Charity to her.

The reasons for being sent were numerous: encourage the members of the Confraternity, resolve difficulties in numerous areas, restart Charities that were not going well, like Villeneuve Saint George or assist in starting Confraternities like Beauvais and Liancourt.

2.1. Preparing for a Visit

Every visit required preparation: physical preparation and spiritual preparation.

² *Ibid.*, Letter 39. – To Saint Louise, 6 May 1629, pp. 64-65.

As often as possible, Confraternities were established at the close of a Mission preached by Monsieur Vincent or the Vincentian Priests. The place was known, the customs of the people and the parish priest often influenced the running of the Confraternity. Louise enjoyed receiving information from Monsieur or his confreres that would assist her in her travels.

Before every departure, Louise would participate in the Eucharist and confide her visit to the Lord of Charity. Receiving her Lord in Communion strengthened her. In December 1629, before leaving for Asnières, she put her feelings in writing:

On Ember Wednesday preceding Christmas, I left for Asnières. I was fearful of making this trip because of my ailments, but the thought of the obedience which was sending me on this trip strengthened me considerably. At Holy Communion, on that day, I was moved to make an act of faith....³

The mission that had been confided to her was lived like a journey of faith. She was aware of being sent for a greater good. The following 5 February (1630) during the Eucharist, Louise de Marillac was led to a deepening of the meaning of her mission:

At the moment of Holy Communion, it seemed to me that Our Lord inspired me to receive Him as the Spouse of my soul and that this Communion was a manner of espousal.⁴

On this anniversary of her marriage to Antoine Le Gras, husband chosen by her family, Louise received from God “*the spouse of my soul,*” and the communion of the Body of Christ sealed this union that invited her to leave all in order to follow her spouse. She continues in her account:

I felt myself more closely united to Him by this consideration which was extraordinary for me. I also felt moved to leave everything to follow my Spouse; to look upon Him as such in the future; and to bear with the difficulties I might encounter as part of the community of His goods.⁵

Louise felt called to live “as part of the community of the Lord’s goods.” Like him, she was now dedicated to the members of the Body of Christ, like him she would have to bear life’s difficulties. From this astonishing light, she could read again the Gospel of Matthew: *What you did for the least of these little ones,*

³ *Spiritual Writings*, A. 50 - Visits to the Confraternities of Asnières and Saint-Cloud, p. 704.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 704.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 705.

you did unto me. Louise received this grace of a “*mystical marriage*” within an act of poverty, wanting to be totally dependant on God in “the missionary activity that she was undertaking.”⁶

This understanding of the meaning of the mission received would deepen within Louise throughout the years. She would endeavour to share it with all with whom she worked. She would explain to the Daughters of Charity that every mission received from God was for his glory and the benefit of the poor:

*First and foremost, they must remember to keep in mind God and his glory. Then they must consider the welfare of the people with whom they will be associated in order to serve them better according to their aptitudes. [...] Above all, they shall be aware of crediting to themselves the least portion of the works in which God does us the honor of employing us. This can come about through vain complacency, satisfaction, or self-serving plans; all things which we must renounce often.*⁷

For Louise, any mission close to the suffering members of Christ was not “*a personal matter.*” This mission was to be lived together, as Church. Asking advice, verifying what was said, what was done, was a necessity for Louise. The mission did not belong to her.

2.2. The Journey

Louise de Marillac used the usual means of transportation for her travels. Shorter distances were more often done on foot (in the 17th century, 10 or 15 kilometres did not deter people) or on horseback. For longer journeys, it was a coach, an uncomfortable vehicle with stops at coach inns (places where the horses rested). Louise found promiscuity within these inns. She also noticed the high price of the meals. Her experience would serve her for advising the Daughters of Charity when leaving on a journey:

*When they arrive, they shall ask the innkeeper’s wife to provide them with a small room so they can sleep separately from the others. [...] Since bread is usually more expensive at an inn, they would be well advised to buy a good quantity from a baker so as to meet their needs.*⁸

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 705.

⁷ *Ibid.*, A. 85 – Instructions to the Sisters who were sent to Montreuil, p. 770.

⁸ *Ibid.*, A. 77 – Practices which our Sisters should observe when traveling to their Foundations, p. 731.

All along the journey, Louise de Marillac had the habit of sending her guardian angel to greet the Master in the tabernacle whenever she saw a Church bell tower. The sisters maintained her simple prayer:

O, my dear Angel, go, I beg you, to Jesus. Tell the Divine Saviour that I adore him, that I love him with all my heart. Invite this adorable prisoner of love to come into my heart, and abide there. This heart is too small to contain such a great king, but I want it to grow larger through love and faith.

Each and every journey of Louise had a time for reading, discussions with one's neighbor, and there were times when sleep would take priority.

2.3. The Visit

Upon arrival, Louise would need to find lodgings. It seems that she wanted to maintain her freedom for she rarely stayed at the Confraternity President's home or that of any of the members. She would go to an inn as at Neufville or Pont-Sainte-Maxence, or stay with a private individual — with Monsieur Ricard in Beauvais, with Monsieur Caille, the baker at Verneuil.

The visit was done in two complementary stages: Louise would take the time and means to determine the life and functioning of the Confraternity and then endeavour to infuse it with new energy. It was through meetings with the members of the Confraternity and home visits to the poor that Louise would perceive what was being done and how things were being lived out. Her sense of observation and discernment served her well. Her competence in numerous areas allowed her to give specific responses.

All of the women involved in the Confraternity of their town were full of good intentions, but relational problems, differing views on how to serve the poor, and questions concerning who should be served by the Confraternity quickly arose. Louise listened attentively. The accounts of the visits are very precise.

a. Relational problems

These were common and first concerned those in charge within the Confraternity:

There seems to be cordiality among the Ladies although some of them sometimes criticize the behavior of the Officers.⁹

⁹ *Ibid.*, A. 53, Notes on the Visits to the Confraternities, p. 721.

Among the officers of the Confraternity is the *Treasurer* who is responsible for stewardship. Every day she gives the money needed to buy food to the one preparing the meals. There was an interpersonal problem with the Treasurer at Verneuil who was deemed too authoritarian:

*They complain that the Treasurer is a difficult character who does not easily accept the advice of others.*¹⁰

At Sannois, the Treasurer, filled with good intentions, wanted to do everything herself. The result being that the other women of the Confraternity no longer felt concerned:

*The Ladies of the Charity have let their zeal cool a bit. Often they do not visit the sick on the days for which they are responsible because the Treasurer is so good-hearted that she cooks the food for those who should be doing it that day.*¹¹

Louise needed a great deal of tact in order for the Treasurers to understand their role and find a balance between being too rigid and too good-hearted. The activities of one should not become a difficulty in the activities of the others. One must know how to stand back and let the others work.

The *Procurator*¹² was at times contested, but the women dared not say anything to this gentleman responsible for the management of the goods of the Association:

*In Fraconville, the Procurator of the Charity has lent money to twenty-five persons with no guarantee of repayment. He seemed disposed to continue this practice as the occasion might rise. The officers do not dare oppose him in this because he is very autocratic.*¹³

Louise understood inter-relational difficulties, but also recognized the need to have someone who knew how to manage. She would have liked for every place to have a relationship with the Procurator as at Bulles where she noted in her account:

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, A. 51, Visits to the Confraternities of Sannois, Franconville, Herblay and Conflans, p. 705.

¹² The duty of the procurer will be to manage and negotiate the matters concerning the temporal funds of the confraternity, through the advice and direction of the parish priest, the prioress, the treasurer and the other assistant, to suggest, at each assembly that is held in regard to this matter, the state of the affairs that he is handling (Rule of the Confraternity of Châtillon – Coste, Vol. 13, p. 426, French Edition).

¹³ *Spiritual Writings*, A. 51, p. 706.

*The Procurator administers everything with great charity. He is well respected and loved.*¹⁴

How do you get people to work together? For Louise, one needed to know how to overcome personal differences when the welfare of the poor was at stake.

Relational difficulties were often linked to quarrels between the villagers. How does one overcome this? In the village of Neufville, Louise de Marillac noticed a very beneficial action on the part of the President of the Confraternity:

*There are often little disputes among the Ladies which interfere with their practice of charity. Some of them do not wish to be in the company of those with whom they have quarrelled. The Superioress is sometimes able to remedy the situation.*¹⁵

It was a joy for Louise to note that at Pont-Sainte-Maxence the exercise of charity was beneficial not only for the sick but also for the entire village:

*They show great cordiality to one another and are devoted to works of charity. Even their husbands encourage them in their endeavours. The people have noticed them, and since the establishment of the Charity, the local inhabitants are better.*¹⁶

Louise de Marillac enjoyed reviewing the passage in the rules concerning mutual relationships with all the members, a passage that she did not hesitate to comment upon:

*They shall cherish one another as sisters whom Our Lord has united by the bond of His love.*¹⁷

b. Service of the Poor

Louise de Marillac was very attentive to the way in which the Ladies carried out their service to the sick. She notes the smallest details in her accounts. At Bulles, she notices the exactitude of the visits:

The sick poor of Bulles are visited three times a day. They bring cooked portions of meat but not in equal amounts to all because

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, A. 52, Visits to the Confraternities of Verneuil, Pont-Sainte-Maxence, Gournay, Neufville and Bulles, p. 724.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 723.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, A. 54, Draft of the Rule, p. 727.

*each Lady wants to take from her home what she judges right so as to please the sick.*¹⁸

At Verneuil, it seemed to her that the sick were being visited late:

*The poor are served every day as the Rule ordains but the portion of meat is brought only at eleven o'clock.*¹⁹

In Pont-Sainte-Maxence visits were curtailed during the epidemic. This was most often done for prudence. Louise wished that the Ladies were a bit earlier and a little more generous in what they brought:

*In Pont-Sainte-Maxence, the Ladies of Charity faithfully visit the sick except during time of plague ... When they visit, the Ladies bring portions of meat already cooked, but they do so only at noon and they leave only a little bouillon.*²⁰

The manner of serving the poor was often a source of friction between the members. The very first rule, that of Châtillon, which served as a model for the confraternities that were later established, was very explicit:

*The person in charge for the day shall prepare the meal and bring it to the sick; on entering, she shall greet them gaily and charitably, arrange the tray upon the bed and place a napkin on it, also a small drinking cup, a spoon and some bread. She shall then wash the patient's hands and say the Benedicte, pour the soup on to the bread in a porringer, and place the meat on a plate, arranging all this on the tray. She shall then charitably invite the sick person to eat, for the love of Jesus and His Holy Mother: and shall do all this as if she were dealing with her own son or rather with God, Who refers to himself whatever good she does the poor.*²¹

But places and circumstances could bring modifications to this precise program.

*Many of the Ladies spend money on their appointed day according to their own whims and pay little attention to the Rule.*²²

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, A. 52, Visits to the Confraternities of Verneuil, Pont-Sainte-Maxence, Gournay, Neufville and Bulles, p. 724.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Coste, *The Life and Works of St. Vincent de Paul*, Vol. 1, p. 84.

²² *Spiritual Writings*, A. 51, Visits to the Confraternities of Sannois, Franconville, Herblay and Conflans, p. 705.

At Sannois, the Superioress of the Confraternity, in agreement with the Treasurer, simplified their method of service. She was content in giving the money to the sick.²³ In Franconville, Louise noticed that meat was rarely given to the sick. The same existed at Conflans.

*Upon the advice of the Pastor, money has been given to the sick.
The sick often have to go without meat.*²⁴

Without judging these practices that were harmful to the well-being of the sick, Louise de Marillac invited the Ladies of the Charity to review the Rules of their Confraternity and apply the given directives.

c. Taking care of the poor

These questions would often come to the attention of the visitor: “Who must we care for? Who are the truly poor? What should be done when the poor who ask to be cared for by the Confraternity have property?” Ever-present questions. Louise de Marillac showed herself to be very attentive to the multiple questions posed by the Ladies of Charity.

In Sannois, the Ladies wondered about the goods set up for the Confraternity of this village:

*They are having difficulty in serving the sick. They say that there is no need for a Charity at Sannois to serve only those who have nothing since there are none, or practically none, in this condition.*²⁵

A situation was presented to Louise that must have occurred in other places:

*There was a sick woman who had property, which she gave in its entirety to her relatives before or during her illness, without the knowledge of the Ladies, who now wonder if they should serve such persons under these circumstances since the timing of the gift may have been deliberate.*²⁶

In Neufville it was the townspeople who reacted to the slowness of the Ladies in accepting persons for care by the Confraternity:

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 706.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 705.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, A. 52, Visits to the Confraternities of Verneuil, Pont-Sainte-Maxence, Gournay, Neufville and Bulles, p. 724.

*In Neuville, the peasants complain because the sick are not attended to quickly enough. The officers are prevented from doing what they should for the sick who have assets which they cannot sell.*²⁷

In Gournay the townspeople watched over the use of their donations:

*The local inhabitants complain that the charitable donations are used to have Masses said.*²⁸

Faced with all of these questions, Louise de Marillac invited the Confraternity members to come together and reflect as a group. The exchange would examine the different goods. Louise de Marillac seemed very competent on the juridical level, using precise terminology. She would make a distinction between personal property that could be sold (extra clothing, pewterware, etc.) and the land and home. There again, a distinction was made between the property that could not “help” the sick person, that is, land that had no advantages, either because there was no yield from the fields or because it was mortgaged, and “land free and clear,” that is, property that was no longer burdened with expenses or mortgages and consequently was a source of revenue for the owner:²⁹

*It was decided that if the sick had extra furnishings or clothing, such as pewter dishes and the like, or wine or a little wheat or even a bread oven, all had to be sold before they could be assisted. However, should they have a piece of land from which they can derive no profit, they should be accepted for care by the Charity. Such would not be the case, if they have an acre to which they have clear title.*³⁰

Another important question concerned the gifts or legacies left by the sick during their life or after their death:

*They also asked if they could assist those sick persons who would want to give their few assets to the Charity after their death or their cure so as to repay the expenses incurred in caring for them.*³¹

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 723.

²⁹ *Dictionnaire de Droit et de pratique*, Claude Joseph Ferrière, 3rd Edition 1778 – Volume 1, p. 68 for “help” and p. 621 for “free and clear.”

³⁰ *Spiritual Writings*, A. 47, Visit to the Confraternity of Gournay, p. 729.

³¹ *Ibid.*

Once again, Louise gave a very specific answer. The service undertaken within the Confraternity of Charity is a free service “*with no thought of remuneration.*” The Ladies who volunteer are not “employed,” salaried.

There must be a great deal of prudence when dealing with legacies. The sick person must not be urged to do so by the member of the Confraternity, the desire to do so must be completely free. The conditions for accepting legacies were quite clear; the sick person must not have any debts nor have any heirs.

In her account Louise wrote down the response she gave to the Ladies of the Charity:

*They were told that [...] if it should happen that a sick person whom they have assisted, desires, at the hour of death, to leave property to the Charity, they may accept it, provided the sick person has not been asked to do this by the Ladies, does not have any debts and does not have any heirs in need.*³²

d. Spiritual Life

Louise would not end her visit without looking into the spiritual life of the group. I believe that she must have asked some questions as the women of the Confraternity did not seem to converse too freely. During her visit at Herblay, Louise noted that the Ladies of Charity were still in their first fervor but that at Sannois the impetus had cooled a bit:

*These Ladies, or at least the majority of them, go months without receiving Holy Communion. They need to have their zeal rekindled by a sermon....*³³

Everywhere Louise noted satisfactorily the concern of all these Ladies to accompany the sick at their moment of death, obtaining the presence of a priest.

e. Results of the Visits

It is perhaps a little difficult to talk about the results of the visits but Louise de Marillac wrote down the commitment taken in numerous places to be more faithful to the Rule and more punctual in their service:

*In Conflans their intentions are good. All have promised to observe the Rule.*³⁴

³² *Ibid.*, p. 730.

³³ *Ibid.*, A. 51, Visits to the Confraternities of Sannois, Franconville, Herblay and Conflans, p. 705.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 705.

What Louise de Marillac did not write down was the enthusiasm she aroused amongst the townspeople. A long time later, she would retell some of her memories to the Daughters of Charity and one of them related:

One time she was in a village where all the women were so encouraged upon hearing her that they told their husbands who also wanted to hear her. The husbands were told that men could not come. The men hid under the bed and everywhere in the room and later asked if she said anything about it.³⁵

And when leaving the area, a large crowd was there to say good-bye. The children were jostling each other and laughing. The same sister continued her story:

And upon leaving the area, everyone and the children rushed after her when one of the children fell under the wheel of a cart. But Louise raised her mind to God to pray for the child who was not hurt at all and she gave thanks to God.³⁶

The arrival of the Visitor, the Animator, was desired by many Confraternities. The requests were most often communicated through Monsieur Vincent:

Mademoiselle Tranchot really wants you in Villeneuve-Saint-Georges where the Charity is going badly. I think Our Lord is reserving the success of that good work for you.³⁷

A few months later, a new invitation arrived:

...to work at the Charity of Champigny which really needs your presence.³⁸

While at Villeneuve-Saint-Georges Louise received a short note from Vincent de Paul:

Please find out how the Charity in Crosnes is doing. It is a little village as far from Villeneuve as the Saint-Victor gate is from Notre-Dame, or thereabouts. If you had a horse to go there, you would not lose time.³⁹

³⁵ Charpy, *Documents of the Company*, Document 803, Testimony of Barbe Bailly, p. 923 (French text only).

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Coste, Vol. 1, Letter 85. – To Saint Louise, 12 October 1631, p. 128.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, Letter 109. – To Saint Louise, June 1632, p. 160.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, Letter 111. – To Saint Louise in Villeneuve-Saint-Georges, 10 July, 1632, p. 164.

3. Qualities of an Animator

One could ask what could have caused such enthusiasm within the Ladies of Charity. They certainly found the qualities that helped them understand the importance of their commitment with Louise de Marillac.

Her attentive listening allowed them to express their difficulties and their questions. All during the time of her meeting with the Ladies of Charity, Louise discovered how much listening required self-forgetfulness. She learned to quiet her concerns for her son (worries that often returned in her letters to Vincent de Paul). These women understood that Louise de Marillac took into account all that they expressed and that she would try hard to grasp the depths of their thoughts. This listening allowed them to have confidence in themselves for they felt recognized in what they were doing. The simplicity with which Louise would listen to all that was said to her offered her speakers true comfort and helped them find solutions to their problems or difficulties.

The Ladies of Charity were struck by her **respect for each person**. With Louise they never saw harsh judgements of their attitudes or behavior. She knew how to indicate what was not going well but with such politeness and love for the poor that her words were well received. It seems that beyond appearances Louise de Marillac knew how to discover and value the possibilities of the members of the Confraternities that she visited.

Louise de Marillac's **competence** in numerous areas made her advices and decisions easier. Louise acquired this knowledge over the years by making inquiries of juridical or financial specialists, observing physicians, and also by reading. Louise was aware that it was necessary to be knowledgeable and to keep up-to-date in order to teach others.

4. Stumbling blocks to avoid

If Louise de Marillac possessed numerous qualities, if she knew how to energize the Ladies of Charity, it was because she had been confronted with personal difficulties. The voluminous correspondence with Vincent de Paul allows us to discover them.

One of the first stumbling blocks that threatened Louise is frequently found among those who fully become engaged within an enthusiastic mission. The risk is to want to do too much! Vincent de Paul warned her:

Blessed be God that you are feeling better and are acquiring a taste for working at the salvation of souls! But I am really afraid that you are doing too much ... Be careful about this, I beg you,

*Mademoiselle. Our Lord wants us to serve Him with common sense, and the opposite is called indiscreet zeal.*⁴⁰

Louise undoubtedly did not understand this warning. While at Beauvais, she received a much more explicit letter.

*Blessed be God that you have arrived in good health! Oh! take great care to preserve it for the love of Our Lord and His Poor members and be careful not to do too much. It is a ruse of the devil, by which he deceives good people, to induce them to do more than they are able, so that they end up not being able to do anything. The spirit of God urges one gently to do the good that can be done reasonably, so that it may be done perseveringly and for a long time. Act, therefore, in this way, Mademoiselle, and you will be acting according to the spirit of God.*⁴¹

Words of wisdom that Louise's active nature had difficulty integrating!

Another stumbling block had been discouragement in the face of difficulties and failures. If there were warm welcomes in numerous villages, there were places where her presence was not wanted. At Villepreux, the parish priest did not accept that a woman would come to his parish to speak to his parishioners. Vincent advised her and helped her to accept this rejection:

*It is very difficult, Mademoiselle, to do any good without conflict. And because we must relieve other people's distress as far as it is in our power, I think that you would be performing an action agreeable to God by visiting the Pastor and apologizing for having spoken without his knowledge to the sisters of the Charity and the girls. Tell him that you thought you could act in Villepreux just as you did in Saint-Cloud and elsewhere, and that this will teach you your duty another time. If he is not pleased with this, leave it at that. My advice is that you do this. Our Lord will perhaps draw more glory from your submission than from all the good you could do. One beautiful diamond is worth more than a mountain of stones, and one virtuous act of acquiescence and submission is better than an abundance of good works done for others.*⁴²

If it was difficult to accept rejection, Louise also knew that it was not easy to maintain balance faced with the multiple praises that she received. She confided these concerns to Vincent de Paul who responded:

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Letter 48. – To Saint Louise, in Villepreux, May 1630, p. 79.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Letter 58. – To Saint Louise, in Beauvais, 7 December 1630, p. 92.

⁴² *Ibid.*, Letter 46. – To Saint Louise, in Villepreux, April 1630, p. 75.

*When you are honored and esteemed, unite your spirit to the mockeries, contempt, and ill treatment that the Son of God suffered. Surely, Mademoiselle, a truly humble spirit humbles itself as much amid honors as amid insults, acting like the honeybee which makes its honey equally well from the dew that falls on the wormwood as from that which falls on the rose.*⁴³

Louise de Marillac, Confraternity animator, desired and knew how to help each of the women who were invested in this work of Charity understand her vocation in the Church and in the world and to accomplish it. Together, they lived the experience of a faith committed to the service of the poor.

It was in welcoming the Word of God and the love of Christ received particularly in the Eucharist that Louise found this energy that allowed her to become involved in the animation of the Confraternities. She realized within her life what Vincent de Paul would later say to one of his confreres who was named Superior of the large Seminary in Agde:

*An important point, and one to which you should carefully devote yourself, is to establish a close union between yourself and Our Lord in prayer. That is the reservoir in which you will receive the instructions you need to fulfill the duties on which you are now about to enter. When in doubt, have recourse to God and say to Him: "O Lord, you who are the Father of light, teach me what I ought to do in this circumstance."*⁴⁴

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

⁴³ *Ibid.*, Letter 58. – To Saint Louise, in Beauvais, 22 October 1630, p. 94.

⁴⁴ Coste, *Conferences to the CMs*, Conference 153, Instructions given to Fr. Antoine Durand, pp. 324-325.

The Role of the Advisor in the Vincentian Family Lay Groups

by José Antonio Ubillús, C.M
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22.VII.2002.

Introduction

I hope my presentation will give you some idea of the profile, role and functions of the Vincentian Family lay group Advisor. I fear repeating what has already been written at great length on this topic over the last few years and has been thoroughly discussed in previous conferences, but one must not forget, like they say in Spanish “you must repeat the good things.”

I do not intend to exhaust this topic in any way, as there is not enough time to do it and you would not have enough patience to listen to me. I will try to present this in a simplified manner and at the same time give you some food for thought. Thank you in advance for your attention.

I. Profound Sense of the Advisor’s Function

It is very important that before beginning and while doing his/her mission the Advisor is clear on its profound meaning, that is, certain of the goal and view towards which he/she is journeying with the group being accompanied. This goal, in my opinion has two dimensions: following Christ and the spiritual experience of Vincent de Paul.

1. Following Christ

The function of the Advisor, while that of teaching Christian faith, is essentially directed at forming disciples of Jesus Christ, adult men and women of faith, people who progressively and responsibly shape the meaning of their lives and the direction of their mission along the formative axis of following Christ. In this sense, the mission of the Advisor is Christocentric teaching: seeking to make Jesus Christ the life center of persons and communities.

To be Christian consists of committing oneself to Jesus of Nazareth, knowing him as the Christ and Savior, through whom the Father offers us salvation in a permanent and lasting way. It is knowing that his way of living and speaking, his practices, are “messianic.” His individual identity as Messiah and Christ is thus revealed by his own response to the disciples sent by John the Baptist asking him

who he was: “*Go back and tell John what you have seen and heard...*” (Lk 7:22). But this knowledge carries with it a practical requirement: pattern our lives after that of Jesus. Knowledge implies following. To believe consists of committing oneself to Jesus Christ and taking on as our own the meaning that he gave to his life. Faith is a personal decision to follow Christ, a new way of understanding and valuing life in relation to Jesus Christ as the ultimate criterion and original source of the meaning.

Jesus did not only say that people would be interested in his doctrine. He looked to form disciples, men and women, who would make an option for life in favor of him. For this he called and invited some to live a life experience in reference to him. He defined this as discipleship and following: “*Come follow me*” (Mk 1:17), “*Come and see*” (Jn 1:39).

Jesus proclaimed his mission at the synagogue in Nazareth in taking up the prophet Isaiah: “*The spirit of the Lord ... has anointed me. He has sent me to bring the Good News to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord’s year of favor!*” (Lk 4:18-19). These words, qualified by John Paul II as “Christ’s first messianic declaration,” show that the Good News of the Kingdom is not a simple announcement, but puts into action what is proclaimed. To evangelize the poor, giving life and liberty constitutes, in the same way, the mission of Jesus. We are faced with two obvious characteristics of Jesus’ mission: his practice of life and freedom and the privilege of the poor, the weak and sinners.

For those of us today, who, at the faith level, want to experience discipleship, the return to Galilee is inevitable, to see him there and learn how to follow him: “*It is there you will see him, just as he told you*” (Mk 16:7). St. Paul’s expression regarding the disciple “*to live in Christ*” or, another, even bolder, “*It is Christ who lives in me*” (Gal 2:20), implies following Jesus and conforming our options, criteria and lifestyles to the words and practices of Jesus.

Therefore the Advisor’s function, as example of faith and discipleship, must consist of journeying together towards Galilee to find Jesus “*teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom and curing all kinds of diseases and sickness among the people*” (Mt 4:23). Following Jesus means taking on the meaning of his life and continuing his mission: proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom and healing those who are suffering.

2. The spiritual experience of Vincent de Paul, disciple of Jesus Christ

Apart from his correspondence, St. Vincent never wrote anything on his spirituality and above all did not seek to systematize it. That is why to make strong connections from what is called Vincentian Spirituality, one must modestly confine

oneself to what Vincent de Paul lived, his spiritual experience, as he himself described it, or was expressed or revealed in his conferences and correspondence: the concrete manner in which St. Vincent followed Jesus Christ, day after day, at the heart of historical events. It is about a spiritual experience whose starting point had been an encounter with the poor that led Monsieur Vincent to discover and intimately know Jesus Christ, evangelizer and servant of the poor and marginalized, throughout his life and to follow him as a disciple. In a letter addressed to Fr. Portail Vincent writes: *“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”* (Coste, Vol. 1, p. 276). According to his first biographer, Abelly, Vincent *“thought of taking a firm and unbreakable resolve to honor Jesus Christ and to imitate him more perfectly than ever before by committing his entire life to the service of the poor”* (L. Abelly, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God, Vincent de Paul*, Book III, Chapter XI, p. 81).

The happiness and grace of St. Vincent’s disciples consists in being inspired by, nourished by and taking on this experience. Therefore, it is also toward this goal that the Advisor must orient the Vincentian group being accompanied. This experience will become the deepest motivation for service and the proclamation of the Kingdom to the poor, suffering faces of Christ.

II. Profile of the Vincentian Advisor

Generally, an Advisor is not prepared to undertake this service without some previous training. And later, he/she will not be exempt from dangers during his/her service. There must be adequate preparation, ongoing revision and updating. I will only indicate certain aspects that merit our attention:

1. Spiritual and life experiences

It is only in living a true spiritual experience in encountering Jesus Christ, evangelizer and servant of the poor, that one can be in harmony with the Spirit of the group being directed. An understanding of theology and Vincentian spirituality is indispensable, but this is not enough if the Advisor is not attentive to this spiritual sensitivity, a sign of Christian maturity. That is, if the Advisor has not made the spiritual experience of Vincent de Paul his/her own. It is not about having this experience of God to a higher degree, but living an encounter with God, taking into consideration limitations in the different circumstances of life. This means that there must be an experience of life and a constant dialogue with the surrounding world.

2. Pastoral experience

Equally there must be a pastoral work close to the poor, deep knowledge of their sufferings and their spiritual as well as physical needs. By itself, evangelical activity for the poor will give the Advisor the needed sensitivity to guide Vincentian Family lay groups who are not theoretical thinkers but workers with the poor, working in their world of poverty.

3. Prayer of the Advisor

The Advisor must support the mission by prayer. Union with God and the group being accompanied are the two poles of this intercessory prayer: placing oneself before God and before the group, praying for them and oneself, in total selflessness (that is, forgoing one's own way of seeing things and self interests), allowing God to progressively transform hearts. In this way the Advisor will become more and more transparent and docile to the activity of the Spirit. Transparent in such a way that God, through the intermediary of the Advisor, communicates with the group and directs them towards the decision to follow Jesus Christ, evangelizer and servant of the poor. A good portion of the essential qualities for dialogue (welcome, respect, balance, mediation and love that revitalizes all) is rooted in this type of prayer.

4. Psychological traits of the Advisor

An experience of the Spirit is not something that just drifts along to people, it comes to them, such as they are and as they are psychologically. Forgetting this would be to ignore the teachings of the best spiritual guides, including Vincent de Paul, experts in human psychology.

An Advisor must be psychologically mature. Maturity is not perfection but acceptance of oneself. Therefore we speak of likeable persons, able to establish relationships with others, having a good dose of self-confidence that stems from healthy self-esteem. This, in turn, comes about from sufficient knowledge of one's limitations, strengths, tendencies and pitfalls and, above all, acceptance of them.

Yet this is not enough. The mission of a Group Advisor requires a minimum of psychological knowledge so as not to become lost amid the surrounding stumbling blocks. He/she must have some knowledge so as to know what to do and greater knowledge so as to know what not to do. The images of God, prayer, affection, desire, wishes, moral imperatives, etc. are areas where psychological wisdom has much to say, even in what concerns dialogue: transference, possible dependencies between the Advisor and group, etc. Also, given that an Advisor may find him/herself faced with people who suffer psychologically or from various pathologies, he/she must be prepared and informed so as to be able to direct them to

people who can help them face their problem without becoming involved in a therapeutic milieu him/herself.

Also important, the Advisor, if he is a man, must be aware of the dignity and vocation of women, their decisive role in the Church and today's society and the contributions they can offer within the Vincentian lay group.

5. Ecclesial sense

The Advisor must also be prepared to fulfill his/her role with a deep ecclesial sense, that is, to assist the group to live out their vocation of service and evangelization of the poor in union with the Universal Church and to understand that, within this union, each distinctive action takes on universal value. To this basic element must be added adequate knowledge of the Church's social doctrine, which, since its origin with Leo XIII, is an expression, now in its centenary, of the Church's current general option for the poor. In the same way, it would be beneficial if the Advisor had knowledge of today's theological trends that give importance to the perspective of the poor in order to competently carry out his/her mission.

6. Knowledge of the Association with whom the Advisor works

The Advisor must know well the Association with whom he/she is working, its history and its own characteristics within the larger Vincentian Family. Differences do exist and it is best to maintain them so that the family has greater richness and avoids blending the different expressions. But, along with indispensable theoretical knowledge, the Advisor should feel a true love for the Association and seriously, as well as consistently, devote his/her time to it.

III. The Role of the Advisor in Vincentian Lay Groups

We are now entering the heart of the topic. I hope that what has been said thus far will help you to understand what is going to be said concerning the role of the Vincentian lay group Advisor.

1. Some preliminary points

1.1. A non-directive, freeing accompaniment

The person fulfilling the task of Advisor can only accomplish it by absolute selflessness in the knowledge that one is being allowed to enter; from the humility of the one who knows that he/she is invited to participate, only as an Advisor, in the journey that the group being accompanied must travel. With this attitude the

Advisor is able to go forward gently in deep respect, aware that he/she is on holy ground.

1.2. “Animated by the Spirit of God” (Rom 8:14)

The Spirit is the life principle and sole guide of a Christian. It is the Spirit that shows the way, guides and gives strength for the journey. No one can replace the Spirit.

1.3. “You must not allow yourselves to be called ‘Rabbi’ ... You must call no one on earth your ‘father’ ... nor must you allow yourselves to be called ‘teachers’ ...” (Mt 23:8-10)

The Advisor is not exempt from the dangers of influence, a swayed conscience or closeness. There is one Father, the heavenly Father, and there is one Lord and teacher, the Christ. The Father and Christ give us the Spirit.

1.4. “He must increase and I must decrease” (Jn 3:30)

As soon as accompaniment begins to progress, it diminishes in intensity and consequently the Advisor tends to disappear. The objective of accompaniment is that Christ, as evangelizer and servant, increase, “be formed” (cf. Gal 4:19) within those making up the group. Thus, participation of the Advisor in this task of growth diminishes little by little.

1.5. A group of lay Vincentians is destined to the mission

A group of lay Vincentians is a place where members prepare themselves to accomplish a mission, that is, to serve and evangelize the poor. Consequently, it is not exactly a bible or theological study group, nor a prayer group, nor a group for sharing ideas.

2. Role and functions of the Advisor

After having given the needed descriptions, I want to discuss, according to my opinion, what the Advisor’s role consists of within a group of lay Vincentians. This is accomplished through the following four functions:

2.1. Spiritual

A. The Advisor must, above all, be a person who knows how to transmit his/her experience of faith in Jesus Christ to the group. The Advisor must animate the members to become, like Vincent de Paul, disciples who follow Jesus Christ, and with Christ, fulfill the mission to evangelize and serve the poor.

B. The Advisor must be watchful that the group lives out the Vincentian spirit and allows itself to be guided by the Spirit and not by traditional or modern trends of spirituality that are not compatible with the true Vincentian spirit. It is almost a radically new way to live the old evangelical spirit (cf. Jaime Corera, *op.cit.*, p. 87). This does not exclude the possibility of enriching this spirit, as did St. Vincent, with spiritualities similar and near to this.

C. The fact that a group of Lay Vincentians is not exactly a prayer group does not say, in any way, that the Advisor does not have the possibility of promoting a life of prayer and Eucharistic celebration among the members that nourishes their faith and is a motivation to continue to evangelize and serve the poor, the true faces of Christ. For a Vincentian, prayer and Eucharist are but a stopping place on the road in following Jesus Christ in order to be spiritually strengthened and continue the mission.

2.2. Human

The human function of an Advisor consists in assisting people to grow by means of, what I consider, four fundamental attitudes:

A. The first is a sincere attitude of **welcome**, going far beyond, of course, being well-mannered, good-natured or initially congenial. To welcome is to affectionately and delicately receive and interact with the experience and life of another person, to know how to be in sync with his/her heart, far from words spoken or heard, without forcing silence. It is not being afraid to listen to or receive all that the other would like to say. It is treating the other with great mercy, not as a parent, but sinner to sinner.

B. The second attitude is **humility**, true humility. We must be keenly aware that we are not the principal actors but limited instruments of God's action. It is about not looking to give lessons but being able to learn, day after day, the lessons that the group members give us, for, from the outset, we do not know everything or rather, we know hardly anything.

C. The third attitude is **patience**. Knowing how to listen unhurriedly and openly — not watching the clock, trying to save time, nor regretting what was spent. Being aware that before being able to say something significant to another there must be a great deal of listening and a great deal of being quiet. And when it is necessary to correct or reprimand, it must not only be done respectfully but also with the certitude that it is being done to truly help the other.

D. And lastly, **selflessness**. Accompaniment is a service, that is why the Advisor puts him/herself at the feet of the other. We cannot become the center of attention. We must be sensitive not to create any sort of dependencies nor have more

demands than those required in the following of Jesus and the service of the poor. We must give totally, without taking into account the affection, gratitude, esteem and appreciation received.

2.3. Formation

Even if good group accompaniment already constitutes an excellent means of formation, the Advisor must be concerned to find the necessary means so that those forming the group have, among other aspects, biblical, spiritual, Vincentian, pastoral and social preparation. This preparation will, at the time of serving and evangelizing the poor, allow them to act not only with their heart and good will, but also intelligently.

2.4. Pastoral

From the pastoral point of view, the Advisor must know how to motivate and guide the group toward the mission. For a Vincentian group, as we have already mentioned, this is always toward evangelization and service of the poor. This mission requires:

A. That the Advisor be aware of the social, economic and political problems in today's world that especially touch the poor and are a contradiction of the Kingdom of God, so as to help the group know and analyze them in light of the social teaching of the Church and take them into account when fulfilling the mission.

B. That the Advisor also assist the group to consider that the Good News carried by Christ has a universal destiny and that it is not necessarily linked to a specific culture. The Gospel must be inculturated; that is, the values present in the different cultures must be taken on and, like yeast in the dough, transform the counter-values that exist in the culture. Naturally, this is valuable for the Vincentian spiritual experience and charism.

C. And lastly, that the Advisor sufficiently know the situation and the most urgent challenges of his/her specific Church (diocese, country). This is a key point. Local groups find their ultimate meaning, as I have just stressed, in mission and service. One cannot obtain a good formation nor growth in a lay vocation if there is not solid reference to the context where the mission will take place.

IV. The Pedagogy of Jesus as Advisor of the Twelve

To conclude, I would like to share a brief reflection of the pedagogy of Jesus as Advisor to the twelve apostles:

At the start of his public life, Jesus called some people to follow him and be his disciples. He shared his life with them and had a very special concern towards them, especially after what is called the crisis of Galilee. He privately and clearly explained to them what he was saying to the multitudes through parables. *“He would not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything to his disciples when they were alone”* (Mk 4:34) for *“to you”* — he tells them — *“the mystery of the kingdom God has been granted”* (Mk 4:11). The disciples also had occasion to ask Jesus what was the sense and importance of his actions. And again they asked regarding the cure of the possessed epileptic after the disciples were unable to expel the evil spirit, *“When he had gone indoors his disciples asked him privately, ‘Why were we unable to cast it out?’”* (Mk 9:28).

He continually dialogued with them, instructed them, counseled them, in combination with hard and demanding criticism: *“This is not to happen among you...”* (Mk 10:43) and comforting concern: *“You therefore must be on your guard. I have forewarned you of everything ... Be on your guard, stay awake...”* (Mk 13:23, 33).

But it was undoubtedly the shared everyday experience *“Come and see”* (Jn 1:39), which constituted the fundamental basis of Jesus’ teachings: his life and actions attentively observed by his disciples became the norm for their future practice. *“It is enough for the disciple that he should grow to be like his teacher...”* (Mt 10:25), he once indicated to them.

Jesus’ manner of acting, his way of approaching people and reacting to their needs were carefully watched and adopted by his disciples as a paradigm of evangelical comportment.

Following Jesus, today and yesterday, consists of extending his mission of evangelization and service of the poor and marginalized in new historical contexts, while at the same time trying to discern his attitudes, options and actions for a true conversion. Within this task, the role of the Advisor of a group destined with a mission is fundamental.

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

The Advisor and the Spiritual Life

by *Edurne Urdampilleta*
JMV International Council
22.VII.2002

Very simply, I would like to thank you for this invitation that we, the laity, have received to clarify, from our point of view, this important topic of spirituality, and to allow us to share the beautiful topic with you. If we truly believe that God's will is made manifest through peoples, events in our lives and the signs of the times, then we must recognize and know these signs in order to read God's will in today's world.

As a young person belonging to a Marian and Vincentian Association (JMV), I believe that the best contribution I can make, from my humble experience of spirituality, is to **draw close to the reality of young people in today's world**, a world that is very different than the one that I myself have lived in, given the rapid changes experienced in our "*technological age*."

I also want to admit that I was hesitant to speak about Vincentian spirituality as you have experts to speak about that topic. Therefore, I thought perhaps it would be more normal for me and more useful for you if, together, we try to look at what is most lacking in young people's lives today and what should be our contribution coming from within Vincentian spirituality. It is true that there are many who propose opportunities to work in favor of others, but there are very few in the Church who offer a contribution such as a spirituality that supports this work of dedication.

I am aware that my analysis is going to be influenced by the reality to which I belong; that is to say, my way of looking at it is always determined by my perception of young Europeans. I am equally aware that the reality we live in is more and more uniform and global. That is why I believe I can echo some of the common characteristics of the world of young people.

One of the main priorities of the JMV Association is that young people be evangelizers of young people. In order to do this I feel that it is very important to look at the current world and the world in which the future generations will live so as to be able to adapt, as much as possible, the essence of the spirituality that we claim to offer them as a gift of the Spirit.

If lay Vincentian spirituality must be characterized by our being inserted into the world, with the poor — but in the exercise of secular tasks — allow me to take

a look at this world the young live in today, even though it obviously seems that I am referring to areas that have nothing to do with spirituality.

1. Characteristics of young people in the digital age or society of knowledge

In looking at the current and future realities I would like to point out:

- Some years ago knowledge and learning came to us from within the family environment or school. Today, knowledge and learning is more and more within the grasp of young people through other technological means (television, mobile phones, videos, music, video games, the Internet...). But this overload of information also gives rise to confusion. We used to say that in prior decades we worked to eradicate illiteracy. At present, “excessive information” also produces ignorance, for, in the final analysis, so much information is a hindrance and is unproductive. Therefore, it is important to **organize the essentials of the message** that we want to transmit to young people and give them **values criteria** that will help them discern from a spiritual point of view as well.
- In the past, we did not speak a great deal about extreme busyness, agitation and stress. Does spirituality, as it is, have anything to bring to today’s lifestyle where we foster values like productivity and efficiency to the detriment of personal and social interaction?
- Perhaps it would be worthwhile to reflect upon the importance we are going to attach to the structure of the message we want to transmit in Vincentian code to the theoretical content, and that of experience, in order to permit the young people to feel within themselves that which we want them to discover. Facing today’s risk of information overload, should we not try to be more creative and experiential in presenting the contents of the message that we are trying to make known?
- Today’s young person is bombarded with stimulation from a capitalist society that vigorously tries to demonstrate that happiness resides in having more than in being. If, by chance, someone might doubt that the Vincentian charism has Good News to share, are we still able to offer a liberating message from the gospel today?
- Today, we also witness changes in family structure, rooted in the fact that, more and more, both parents work. In addition, the average number of children per family is decreasing: in Europe, for example, there are 1.8 births per family. Many children are growing up alone, without brothers or sisters, and with difficulties for socializing. From our experience of family and community, can we offer these future generations something new to be

discovered, something that can enrich their personal and spiritual maturation?

- In a society that holds on to individualism and competitiveness, where inequalities between countries continue to grow more and more, will our Vincentian spirituality have something to give in inviting us to remain close to the sufferings of others? Through these lines I will try to show that this is possible.
- In the society in which our young people live, where one seeks to standardize everything, even culture, is it worth trying, as Christians, to make the wealth and richness of charisms known through which the Spirit is manifested in the Church over time, so that our young men and women experience the joy of the richness proper to the Vincentian charism?
- In a culture where television offers poor educational quality, characterized by “trashy” programs, where violence and a lack of values become the norm, is it worthwhile for us to be courageous in communicating altruistic messages to young people, newsworthy altruism incarnated in men and women like Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac?

These are the reflections that I had to consider before thinking about the aspects of spirituality that must be stressed today so that these aspects can become meaningful for the young people we will frequently see and meet in the coming years. Now I would like to cite certain elements that, in my opinion, can foster our communication of a spiritual heritage that is so rich, our Vincentian Spirituality.

2. “Preparing the soil in times of drought”: a challenge for today’s Advisor

I am going to specifically allude to the metaphor of thirst that frequently appears in the bible to remind us continually of today’s young people’s thirst for altruistic values, a hidden thirst, often under the signs of apathy.

In speaking of spirituality, we must agree in noting that today’s society does not facilitate understanding these dimensions as the rhythm of life is of no help and religion is an area that is hardly cultivated in most families. The number of families that educate their children in their faith is becoming more and more reduced. That is why our responsibility of accompanying young people in this process is becoming greater and greater.

From this perspective, we know there are attitudes that make understanding these dimensions difficult: distortions, excessive noise, busyness, activism, materialism, and pleasure-seeking. And yet there are other dimensions such as **a**

thirst for depth that helps young people to open themselves to other dimensions where they can find the will of God in their lives.

From the outset, when trying to help young men and women understand the subtle language through which God is manifest,¹ our challenge consists in helping them to be aware that we have obvious realities that are not found on the Internet but that the dissatisfaction and worry they feel does have an answer. Otherwise stated, it is up to us to **“arouse the thirst”** before giving them to drink. Now, we are going to look at how we can awaken the thirst that is spoken of in the gospel.²

a. Developing the ability to be silent and to listen

Why am I giving so much importance to this aspect? As a teacher I am noticing, year after year, the difficulties students are having concentrating and listening. How can we lend an ear to the subtlest personal levels, for example, when we speak about listening to the “will of God”?

I will begin by speaking of this aspect given that most young people today were born during an era of great activism and find great difficulty in discovering dimensions such as silence because, from the outset, they have the sensation of wasting time. They live in a world where over-stimulation is well developed at some levels and very disorienting at others. More and more, we must teach them to center their attention on the interior person. A few years ago this would have been interpreted as self-centeredness, but today it becomes very necessary.

Many young people need to find out that they need to do fewer things and have more calm and tranquility in order to discover the treasures that we all carry within ourselves. If not, how can they share these treasures with others? Previous generations had more contact with nature. Today things are more and more artificial, even food. We should not consider all knowledge as being totally acquired. Of course, creative solitude and silence have nothing to do with escaping from the world, imposed silence, isolation, or lack of communication as there are many kinds of silence. Here we are talking about those who can cultivate, within others, the desire to actively change and “build” themselves if we want our young people to make lasting and quality decisions.

If we want to have a quality ministry, we must remember that working with people on this level requires that we know how to quiet other stronger voices — tensions, pressing demands and intense activities — in such a way that attention is not dissipated but turned towards the inner person.

¹ Cf., 1 Kgs 19:9a, 11-16.

² Jn 4:11-15.

Exterior silence is necessary but it is not enough. It is a precondition for prayer from which all desire for service flows: “*Whenever you pray, go to your room, close your door, and pray to your Father in private.*”³ Interior silence is much more difficult to attain. The ability to concentrate and focus must be able to overcome anxiety, the affective need of young people and excessive activism. From this comes the need to remove oneself from our usual places to participate in what we call encounters, retreats or days of reflection. Do not think that young people will find these truths themselves if we do not show them to them, for these truths are not a part of the everyday advertisements and commercials present in their lives.

Please God that our young people find the opportunity to discover, alongside us, that silence is not only the absence of words, but also that silence has its own integrity and obvious fruits. Then the seed of Vincentian charism will fall on good ground and give abundant fruit in due time. May they also discover that in order to be able to come close to others and meet their needs, we must find a place for them in our hearts. In order for **listening** to be authentic, young men and women must experience, together with us, that we are open to discovering other realities, that we have an ongoing ability to learn and generate alternatives. We also have to make spaces available so that people can meet, communicate on a deeper level and together look at the realities within which they live with a Vincentian spirit of justice and conversion.

b. Developing discernment and the ability to savor things

More and more, today’s generation is finding it difficult to stop to think and “savor things,” in the sense of focusing attention on the interior person and not on exterior stimulation.

As counterparts to a society of abundance, Vincentians have the joy of having discovered the values of “humility,” “simplicity” and “austerity” that are in contrast with the illusions that a market society tries to inculcate.

I sense that we must put the accent not so much on the exterior moral sense, that always seems a bit imposed, as much as on one’s own convictions and experience when referring to the realities we have discovered, giving them the value they contain, according to us, without being afraid of speaking about them. We must also have the courage to speak about our own experiences, the times of confusion and confrontation we have had to journey through so that young people find the resources needed when confronted by the numerous crises that may come up during their lives in relationship to their various choices.

In the measure that we inculcate a critical spirit within young men and women and we provide possible experiences, helping them discover, themselves, the

³ Mt 6:6.

importance of the world's values and the gospel values, they will be able to understand the value and richness of the spirituality we are trying to transmit to them. Often, we feel that the fact of speaking of these realities will give them the impression that we are far from them, yet in reality, in order to appear "close to them," many times we do not show what is most authentic within us, and in the end, "they are disappointed."

If we want the truths that we are trying to communicate to them to be not only beautiful ideas or simple ideology, we will have to interiorly savor these truths, for young people are very open to the affective world and in the measure that their hearts are touched, they put their hands to work. In the same way in which we learn to enjoy the presence of a friend, we must strive in such a way so that young people's relationship with God touches every fiber of their being. We want God to be truly present in all aspects of their secular life. I am only pointing out here the need observed to live in greater depth, taking into account the societal characteristics of our time.

c. Being in close contact with the suffering of others

We must have the courage to show young people the data of hard reality so they can open their eyes and understand that there are still more things to do. And in order for them to remain faithful to certain values, they will need to be firmly grounded by a strong interior life.

We, Vincentians, have the opportunity to live in relationship within a world that is also thirsting for solidarity. It is a message that young people with an open heart know how to grasp well. We all have this healthy preoccupation of helping young men and women open themselves up to the realities of others; but I do not know if we always have the words and actions to put this invitation into practice, for sometimes — and I am saying only sometimes — we criticize them for not doing more, even before the young person, coming from his/her own free choice, has chosen to give this service. In my understanding, St. Vincent had total trust in providence. Perhaps it is a value we need to bring back during these times when we are only waiting to receive it.⁴

Youth is a fundamental stage in the psychological development of a person. It is the age where self "identity" must be established. But this activity will remain incomplete if we forget that we are interdependent. This age is a special time when the young person perceives the possibility of this precious relationship with others and the fact that we are responsible for each other. In this way the young person is

⁴ St. Vincent said: "... *the missionary shall not be too solicitous about temporal goods, but shall cast his care upon the Providence of the Lord; holding, for certain, that as long as he shall be deep-rooted in this charity, and grounded on this hope, he shall ever dwell under the protection of God, and no evil shall approach him nor shall any good be wanting to him...*" (Coste, *Conferences to the CMs*, Conference 198, p. 482).

in a relationship that offers a rewarding opportunity of paying attention to a person in need.

Therefore, besides the need to discover one's identity, youth is an age where one wants to have deep relationships with others and community experiences with other people. Jesus said that whatever a person does for another, whether it is welcoming, clothing, helping or caring for them ... it is done to him.⁵ When we are able to distinguish the same spirit in ourselves and others, we become more flexible and a "we" experience begins to naturally take place. We have many gifts to offer young people, for example, experiencing reciprocity. Is there anything more Vincentian than this?

3. "Plowing the good earth": a bold task for the Advisor

The principle task of the youth Advisor consists in fostering the growth of spirituality, in all its depth, flowing from the Vincentian spirit. This is a great challenge for lay Vincentians. This proposition takes on a particular nuance within Marian Associations, established through the specific desire of the Blessed Virgin. That is the case with the Vincentian Marian Youth where Mary invites us to imitate her virtues (modesty, humility, silence, transparency, etc.) and her concern for the poor as found in the Canticle of the Magnificat, her visit to her cousin Elizabeth and the Wedding Feast at Cana.

Within the catechumenal process that is **at the heart of the Vincentian Marian Youth**, we place special value on the following tasks:

a. Offering personal accompaniment and discernment

More than ever there must be face-to-face interaction with the person who can advise and assist in order to accomplish the personal work that leads to mature choices. This task can be done in dialogue on an individual level or in accompanying groups, by allowing discussions to develop.

A young person today can find this kind of person in an Advisor who has experience, time for dialogue and solid criteria to help him/her grow within his/her process of maturing in the faith. Young people are looking for objective, selfless people without prejudice, who can accompany and guide them without making decisions for them.

It is best to set aside time to "review." Within JMV we concretize this by developing and revising a "**young person's life plan**," for we feel that *interior growth* is not connected to the amount of subject matter received or developed but to its depth and assimilation. It is as bad to forget the need to look at oneself as to

⁵ Cf., Mt 25:40.

fall into excessive introspection, where the follow-through of the Advisor, who, like Zen teachers “tapping the shoulder,” reminds them that the time has come to move from action to commitment.

When faced with the excessive propositions and teachings that future generations receive, it is necessary to teach them to “reflect” for it is only with this deep attitude that they be able to have a better understanding of themselves, make decisions and build their own lives.

b. Prayer and life must be in accord

For Vincentians, “contemplative work” and “active work,” far from being in contrast, are complementary. They are two inseparable aspects, like the two sides of a coin. The young committed person needs both aspects so that his/her relationship with God, with others and with the world is harmonious and efficacious on the spiritual and apostolic levels and believable on the ecclesial and social levels. Consequently, we must help them understand that “when we speak of active spirituality or spirituality of action, this means that the inspirational sources, the goals to attain and the most convincing motivations to take on have their point of reference in action.”⁶

Life conversion can only come from God (there is no mistake about that), experiencing the Spirit and the opening of our deepest self to God-within-us. This also presupposes abandoning the superficial and old self that is in each of us. So, from water and the Spirit⁷ is born a new person enlivened by the Spirit of God. How can we teach young men and women this interior conversion if the Spirit is not in them teaching them how to pray? St. Vincent refers to this in the well-known phrase: “Give me a person of prayer and this one will be capable of everything.”⁸

I share with you too the words of Karl Rahner for I believe that the laity should take these questions seriously or run the greater risk of being taken in by the world’s mentality. Karl Rahner states:

We already stated that the future Christian will be a mystic or he/she will not be Christian. This phrase is incorrect and the weight of its truth will be clearer in the spirituality of the future when we understand through transcendence, not by parapsychological phenomenon, but by an authentic experience of God that flows from the center of existence. Possessing the Spirit is not an occasion that

⁶ Pérez Flores, Miguel. “Introducción a la espiritualidad vicenciana laical” in *Avivar la caridad*, No. 1, CEME, Salamanca, 1997, p. 77.

⁷ Jn 3:5.

⁸ Coste, Conferences to the CMs, Conference 51, p. 77.

*will only be taught from the outside, in a didactic way, like an event that is beyond our existential awareness ... but it will be experienced from within.*⁹

In order for our young people to achieve this level of spirituality, they need to progressively begin developing skills for prayer, integrating prayer as a normal element in their daily lives. “*Prayer is time spent before God, listening to God.*” Young people must personally discover this at the same time that they are developing solid practices in prayer with their groups.

Concerning prayer, Mother Teresa of Calcutta states: “*The more we receive in silent prayer, the more we have to give in our actions. We need silence to delve into the soul.*”

As you can see I am quoting from other people, non-Vincentian sources, for another characteristic of young people is that they greatly value this openness, the fact of being open to learning all that will help us to understand the gospel.

It is true that St. Vincent himself spoke of “*leaving God for God,*” but it is obvious that this was concerning other situations at a time where it seemed unacceptable to leave prayer for acts of charity. From my experience, the young people of today need to “meet God to be able to serve.” They need to recover and discover meeting spaces with God so that their service is not simply activism.

Some young people say that they are doing fine in life, but in prayer they are not focused, they are bored and do not know what to do. Is it possible that a young person can be fine in life but not in prayer? We must ask this person if when he/she is reading, driving or working are they focused on what they are doing or if they are thinking of other things. It is probable that in the busyness of everyday life, this person is not aware of tensions, being pulled in different directions, distraught. But in reality the situation is the same when praying or working or serving others, for the person is the same. A superficial person lives and prays superficially. A person of depth fully lives and prays. I believe that Vincentians especially should include prayer as an essential part of our life.

c. Advisors: teachers of the interior life

In all honesty, we must recognize that many things that we have spoken about cannot be learned in a book. As in many things, we learn a discipline or a way of thinking through a school under the direction of teachers knowledgeable in that tradition. This is why, similar to some of the technological means that we have, nothing can diminish the need for Advisors who introduce us to the foundations of

⁹ K. Rahner, cited by W. Jager, *Encontrar a Dios hoy a través de la contemplación*, Narcea, Madrid 1991, 57-58.

spirituality and who explain and clarify ways of acting and doing so that young people are able to assimilate it.

In order to complete the two preceding points we could bring in many ideas and adapt them to the circumstances in which we would use them. But I am going to briefly enumerate other aspects to include in our programs as a guide for the function of Advisor:

- Create critical minds, fostering a mature a mature Christianity;
- Seek unity of life;
- Create clear challenges for living out Vincentian values that flow from the gospel and the Vincentian spirit;
- Live out the values as a result of a personal, discerned, critical, free choice and with a humanist point of view;
- Design creative liturgies free from obscure rituals for today's men and women and, at the same time, open to the diversity of cultures;
- Challenge more so as to understand the foundations of our Vincentian spirituality, update its contents adapted to today's men and women and give it specific form by putting it into practice.

Spiritually developed people rarely fall into "activism." Many things are happening around them but that is because they have succeeded in energizing the potential of others, guiding them towards the common good and social justice.

4. "Patiently awaiting the fruits": by way of a conclusion

To close, I want to recall one of the facts that we indicated for living life, even if we are witnesses to it and we do not come to understand the importance that it may have for us. I remember the gospel example of a quiet Daughter of Charity that I knew years ago in Cuba. She served the poor, like many others, in a psychiatric hospital in old Havana called "The Golden Age." In contemplating the conditions within which she worked and how she treated the sick, I understood the power of prayer and the gospel in her life. I was with her for only a short time and we hardly exchanged a word. There was no need, for everything she did was a witness. She was one with the poor. She would never know the importance, thanks to the Spirit, of what her fidelity to serving and the power of her gestures meant to me.

I am convinced that if people allow themselves to be filled with a sense of the spiritual and carry it within themselves as if it were "*second nature*," they would have no need to say a great deal in order to be understood.

As a closing, I invite you to reflect upon a quote from Miguel Pérez Flores, C.M. He states that Lay Vincentian Spirituality:

*is a spirituality of life and action, inspired by Christ, Evangelizer and Servant of the Poor, in harmony with the Church, centered on the practice of charity as the highest gospel value, with a preference for the poor; a current spirituality, that gives witness, is animated by the virtues of humility and zeal, is attentive to the signs of the times, to the calls of the Church and the cries of the poor.*¹⁰

St. Vincent had the gifts of creativity, adaptability and updating. I am sure that you also have inherited them. And the proof is that you are here today, coming from different situations, but united by the same apostolic zeal. During these days, let us ask the Spirit to enflame within our hearts the same fire that enflamed the heart of St. Vincent so that as Advisors of Vincentian Associations, we truly feel that “We have been chosen by God as instruments of his boundless and Fatherly love....”¹¹

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

¹⁰ Pérez Flores, Miguel, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

¹¹ Coste, Conferences to the CMs, Conference 207, p. 582.

The Advisor and the Apostolic Mission of Lay Vincentians

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At the start of this 21st century, thousands of local groups of the different branches of the Vincentian Family, hundreds of national and diocesan movements as well as international institutions have an Advisor, a man or a woman, each called by a different title according to the various languages and places. Almost all Advisors are named by someone who has authority over them. There are, however, numerous instances where an Advisor arises from within the group itself by election to the office of president or leader. Yet, there is a general tendency to look for an Advisor outside of one's own institution.

Among the Advisors of the different branches of the Vincentian Family we find: members of the CM, Daughters of Charity, diocesan priests and even bishops, men and women religious and laity, who are usually members of the same institution. In our work and discussions scheduled for today concerning the role of the Advisor in the area of the apostolic mission of Vincentian lay institutions, we are not going to go into the manner of being named to this charge (outside nomination or internal election), nor its canonical designation (secular priest, religious or laity). We are only going to try to describe what is expected of the Advisor in the apostolic animation of the group.

Know the Vincentian Spirit

In order to be an Advisor of a Vincentian Family lay group there is no requirement (as we will see) to belong to one of the other branches of the Vincentian Family. But it is necessary or rather vital to know what we call the "Vincentian spirit" as it is this spirit that is lived out in all of the branches. One could assume that this spirit already exists within or is a part of an Advisor coming from a Vincentian institution (missionaries of the CM, Daughters of Charity, members of the different lay branches of the Family). It is assumed that they already have this spirit but it must be assured. Legal membership in a Vincentian institution does not guarantee, in and of itself, that the Advisor has a clearly Vincentian awareness. The Advisor must work to possess this awareness and if he/she already has it, the Advisor must continuously cultivate it in order to be a good Advisor.

If an Advisor is from a non-Vincentian setting (diocesan priest, religious), it is possible that there may be some difficulties in the beginning, as diocesan

priests and religious have, in turn, other spiritualities to which they must be faithful. In other words, given the spiritual and pastoral demands of their own lives, neither diocesan priests nor any member of another religious congregation are obligated to incorporate the Vincentian dimension into their spiritual outlook.

Nevertheless, this fact should not be an insurmountable difficulty, for any one of them can be a good Advisor of a Vincentian group as what they have in common with the group is more important and more numerous than the things that separate them: the same Lord, the same faith, the same baptism, belonging to the same Church, the sacraments and the new commandment of love. And today there is another element that must be added, obligatory for all members of the Church and which is not, in any way, exclusive to Vincentian institutions: the (preferential) option for the poor, an element which, when taken seriously, makes the relationship of the Advisor easier with no matter what Vincentian group.

Therefore, Advisors coming from a non-Vincentian institutions should be careful not to introduce spiritual aspects or their own ministries into the group's spirituality or apostolic activity that would be foreign to the group's spirit. An example of the spiritual aspect would be trying to change the Vincentian group into a type of Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament Confraternity or other pious devotion. In the ministerial aspect, it would be changing a local group of the Miraculous Medal Association, for example, into a team of ladies officially charged with cleaning the church and sacristy.

It is not enough to avoid introducing aspects that belong to the proper spirituality of the Advisor and others within the spiritual vision and pastoral activity of the Vincentian group. An Advisor coming from the "outside," so to speak, as well as one coming from "within" the Vincentian Family must know the Vincentian spirit as much as possible, since this person was named an Advisor in order to cultivate this spirit and not for any other reason. In this vital aspect of knowing well the Vincentian spirit, the members of the group themselves can help the Advisor progress in understanding the Vincentian spirit (through books, dialogues, occasional appropriate comments, etc.).

Forming the Vincentian Spirit

The ideal would be that a Vincentian group would be able to form itself. In fact, numerous groups in all of the institutions are presently accomplishing this in various areas, especially in co-leadership of apostolic activities. Yet, the fact of wanting and asking for an Advisor shows that the group expects a certain level of formation and animation from him/her that most or all of the members feel they themselves do not possess in any great degree. That is why there is an expectation that the Advisor contribute to the spiritual and apostolic progress of the group given his/her greater knowledge and total consecration to the apostolic

work. That is the situation for most Advisors. By vocation and by profession they have a greater understanding and a deeper consecration to the universal apostolic mission of the Church.

The Advisor must clearly know what the Vincentian group needs and what it is asking is a specific Vincentian formation and not a general Christian formation, nor a formation divided into areas such as understanding the Bible, liturgy, sacramental life, Catholic ethics, different apostolic activities (health, education) or other similar themes. Today, there are within and outside the Church many places where one can receive formation in these areas.

This does not mean that these should be excluded from the formation program of Vincentian groups, but if they are taken on, the Advisor and the group must take into account that all of this must be studied from a Vincentian perspective, for it is a distinctive characteristic of the group. It is as simple as that. For example, it is easy to direct New Testament Bible Studies and also the Old Testament from the point of view of God's preference for the poor and humble. One can say the same about the Eucharist or pastoral topics such as caring for the sick, teaching, or ethics, and particularly the social doctrine of the Church. All of these subjects and other similar ones can be suggested and directed by the Advisor in order to have a better apostolic formation in accord with the Vincentian characteristics of the group being accompanied.

Apostolic mission of the Laity

The laity themselves have an apostolic vocation that does not flow from the hierarchy of the Church but *"from their union with Christ the head"* of the Church, that is, from their baptism: *"...incorporated into Christ's Mystical Body through Baptism ... they are assigned to the apostolate by the Lord himself"* (*Apostolicam actuositatem*, 3). In such a way that *"the member — of the Church — who fails to make proper contribution to the development of the Church must be said to be useful neither to the Church nor to him/herself"* (*Ibid.*, 2). *"On all Christians therefore is laid the pre-eminent responsibility of working to make the divine message of salvation known and accepted by all throughout the world"* (*Ibid.*, 3).

In order to carry out this apostolic mission specific to the lay person, there is no need to belong to an association consecrated to apostolic activities: *"...all lay persons (including those who have no opportunity or possibility for collaboration in associations) are called to this type of apostolate and are obliged to engage in it"* (*Ibid.*, 16). They must consecrate themselves to the practice of the apostolate *"strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit through Confirmation"* (*Ibid.*, 3), for their condition as baptized members of the Church requires it of them.

We said that this mission, rooted in baptism, does not come from the hierarchy of the Church, although it is carried out within the Church. The Church must consider the “*spiritual principles and support*” that come from the hierarchy for this has the function of “*directing the conduct of this apostolate to the common good of the Church,*” that is why the Church has the duty to “*attend to the preservation of doctrine and order*” (*Ibid.*, 24).

The distinctive feature of the lay apostolate is to evangelize what is called the “temporal order,” that is the world and its multiple activities, for “*the laity, in accordance with their state of life, live in the midst of the world and its concerns ... like leaven*” (*Ibid.*, 2).

In order to carry all this out, the layperson does not need a specific Advisor, except perhaps in the general sense, in which all of us, not only the laity, need the help of the other members of the Church to grow in dedication to the apostolate.

The apostolic mission of lay Vincentians

Being a Christian, thus being an apostle, is a general vocation common to all baptized persons. Being Vincentian is a specific vocation for those who feel called to it and who become a member of one of the various Vincentian institutions present in the Church. This is fundamental. It is not enough to love and work with and for the poor to be considered Vincentian, for all Christians, not only Vincentians, must do so by the mandate and teaching of Christ, and also today by the teaching of the Church.

Being Vincentian means living out the teaching and mandate of the Lord in relation to the poor. Not simply living it as one of the various practices that flow from faith in Christ and from baptism, but as the center and soul, the vital principle of the Christian life in following Jesus Christ who was sent by the Father to evangelize the poor (Lk 4:18). All of this is accomplished as a member of one of the institutions founded by St. Vincent de Paul or inspired by his spiritual, Christian and apostolic vision.

Vincentian institutions were not established to accomplish a general activity like those that have come about from the fact of being baptized. All Vincentian institutions were established with the specific goal of working for the spiritual and corporal redemption of the poor. Vincentian laity can and must try to be gospel leaven in the family, in the world of culture, at work, in the economy, in politics, in sports, in leisure and entertainment, for they are also baptized persons who must seek to animate with an evangelical spirit the world in which they lives. Even in the midst of everyday life, the layperson with a true

Vincentian spirit will work from the perspective of redeeming the poor and taking them into account in all he/she does. It goes without saying that this is even more so within apostolic activities specifically directed towards this end.

Advisor for the apostolic mission of lay Vincentians

We are not going to discuss the specific function of the Vincentian group Advisor in aspects such as the different forms of organization or formation. The focus of this work is to simply look at the Advisor's function in relation to the apostolic activity of the Vincentian institution.

In some countries the Advisor is also known as a 'spiritual director' or a similar expression according to different languages. I do not see any drawbacks in keeping this expression as long as it is clear that the function does not consist in directing but in animating and advising, especially in the area of apostolic activity. All Vincentian institutions and their respective groups have their organizations, governance and decision-making bodies, generally elected by the members of the group or institution. It is up to them to direct and make decisions within the areas of apostolic activity. This function does not fall within the responsibility of the Advisor. Certainly the Advisor may suggest, for example, a concrete activity, but the decision to take it on is not up to him/her; the decision is up to those responsible for the group or the institution. Undoubtedly, central to the Church's unity and charity, lay Vincentians must show themselves capable of directing themselves "*the apostolic undertakings which are established by the free choice of the laity and regulated by their prudent judgement*" (AA, 24). In this way, what is known today as "lay autonomy" is thus accomplished in Vincentian institutions.

1. Accompaniment in the evangelical spirit

The evangelical spirit must not only be the base and root of all baptized persons but also of all institutions within the Church, and Vincentian institutions as well. Generally, the Advisor, male or female, is named or chosen under the assumption that the person is skilled in the evangelical spirit. Consequently one hopes to receive his/her advice and opinion to know if an activity that the group is proposing to undertake has a true evangelical spirit or is it, for example, simply a mere social activity without any evangelical reference. The Advisor must attentively watch over this fundamental aspect, especially in our day and time, when there is a proliferation of volunteer organizations without any reference to evangelical values and who, at times, militate against these values. A Vincentian group cannot become a simple agent of social action.

2. Accompaniment in the Vincentian spirit

Living and acting with a Vincentian spirit, as we have come to say, is the characteristic and specific feature of Vincentian institutions and groups. It is their specific contribution to the wealth of the different charisms that exist within the Body of Christ, in the Church. A Vincentian group must assure that all its activities are animated by this Spirit. All the members — we will say this again — follow Jesus Christ for the redemption of the poor, and they are working for the redemption of the poor.

In this respect, the Advisor's function consists in keeping this idea alive in all of the activities taken up by the Vincentian group. It is not always easy. Given that the majority of those who belong to Vincentian institutions are faithful and practicing children of the Church, the different groups that make up these institutions often receive requests coming from the clergy, the local hierarchy or other Church forces, to participate in activities that certainly belong to the Church but that do not respond to the specific Vincentian call. Sometimes this request may come from the Advisor him/herself as perhaps he/she does not understand the true Vincentian spirit or because there is an opportunity to take advantage of the ecclesial availability of the group members.

This alluring temptation must be avoided, for it is precisely that — a temptation, so that the Vincentian group does not end up becoming a sort of pious confraternity or something similar. The Advisor, and all the members of the group, must be watchful that this does not happen. The Advisor is not an Advisor for general apostolic activities but for Vincentian apostolic activities that are appropriate to the group being accompanied. All of the activities must be oriented toward liberating the poor, directly or indirectly. They all must be done in a clear spirit of humility, simplicity and charity.

3. Advisor of a specific Vincentian institution

Even if there is a fundamental unity within the Vincentian spirit, the various Vincentian institutions have their specific characteristics that the Advisor must respect and help to maintain. In order to do this, the Advisor must know well the style proper to the institution of which he/she is the Advisor. I want to illustrate this with a specific example.

All Vincentian institutions have a great devotion to the Virgin Mary not only in the capacity as being members of the Church but because this devotion is also part of the Vincentian heritage from the beginning of St. Vincent de Paul's life. Among the Vincentian organizations, there are some that place this devotion at the heart and being of their activity (Miraculous Medal Association, Vincentian Marian Youth, Sons and Daughters of Mary, etc.). The Advisor of any one of these institutions must not lose sight of this fact in accompanying the respective group, so as to avoid two extremes.

One extreme would be to center all of the group's activities on Marian devotion (home visits, novenas, etc.), excluding apostolic activity bearing any resemblance to assisting the poor or considering it as a marginal activity. The Advisor must be watchful that the group does not fall into this extreme if it still wishes to be considered a Vincentian group.

Another extreme would be to diminish or withdraw Marian activities belonging to these institutions under the pretext that the only important thing today is to work in favor of the poor. We must do this but not to the neglect of the rest. In addition, all Marian activity should and must be animated according to the Vincentian spirit. This is possible if the Advisor and the group members are truly enlivened by this spirit. After all, was not the Virgin Mary the first in the New Testament to sing and celebrate exalting the lowly and hungry (Lk 1:52-53)? Vincentian Marian associations were created also to imitate Mary's characteristics. Helping the members do this within their apostolic activities is a function of the Advisor.

4. Accompaniment that broadens the horizons of Vincentian institutions

Thanks to sociological studies, we have known well, for a long time, that all human institutions, without exception, can easily allow themselves to be carried along by a trend, not only of seeing problems through their own eyes (which, in a certain measure is good and inevitable, as that is why diverse institutions were founded), but also of closing themselves within that vision and ending up existing only for themselves. The Church, which is divine by its foundation, is also human and is not free from this tendency, no more than its institutions. In principle, Vincentian institutions cannot escape it either.

The Advisor can play an excellent role in this area and must do so in order to avoid this tendency. Usually the Advisor is in a good position to do this for often the Advisor is a member of a different institution than the group being accompanied. This allows the Advisor to broaden the horizons of the Vincentian group. If the Advisor perceives obvious signs of the group withdrawing into itself, the Advisor is obligated to open the eyes and hearts of the members to other horizons. For example, collaborating with other Vincentian institutions. Often enough, the Advisor is also a member of another Vincentian institution. This should make it easy to open the group to apostolic collaboration with other branches of the Vincentian Family as they share the same fundamental spirit. The group could also collaborate in a charitable activity with other institutions of the Church, diocese, and/or parish. This would also be possible, especially when the Advisor is a member of the local clergy.

One must not close the horizon of Vincentian institutions to collaborating with other institutions outside of the Church, for the mission of Vincentian

institutions is not limited to ecclesiastical institutions but is open to the poor of the entire world, be they Christian or not. In this respect also, the Advisor can have a great deal of influence on the Vincentian group. Many among them have a universal mission as their own call and not only a local one.

Conclusion: Advisor accompaniment

The Advisor is a servant but is also a disciple. For this reason the Advisor must not place him/herself within the group as the supreme source of all wisdom. The Advisor has things to learn as well. First, as has already been stated, the Advisor must learn of what the Vincentian spirit consists and what are the characteristics specific to the Vincentian group being accompanied. This is just the beginning.

But the Advisor will often find, within all lay Vincentian institutions, many members who, by their example and often by their words, give the Advisor beautiful lessons on what it means to be Christian and have a Vincentian Spirit. The Advisor, who is servant and disciple, must be ready to learn from the group with true humility. All of us in the Vincentian Family, including Advisors, need the help of our brothers and sisters in faith in order to steadily progress in the Christian life and an authentic Vincentian vocation.

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

Vincentian Family Associations: Juridical and Canonical Dimensions

by Alberto Vernaschi, C.M.
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24.VII.2002

We are just about at the end of the Vincentian Formation Month for Assistants, Advisors and collaborators of the various Associations within the Vincentian Family. Besides the joy all you have gained and received here, you surely are feeling a little tired as well. I would like to be able to give you some relief, but, unfortunately, I have the task of providing you with an aspect, the juridical aspect to be exact, that is usually rather difficult to digest. I will do my best to deliver the subject, not in an amusing way, but at least in an acceptable way. I will limit myself to the most important elements.

I. Right of Association in the Church

1. The right of association is part of the rights of all the faithful. The explanation of this Code of Canon Law principle is quite clear in C. 215: “Christ’s faithful may freely establish and direct associations which serve charitable or pious purposes or which foster the Christian vocation in the world, and they may hold meetings to pursue these purposes by common effort.”

This is about a common right of all the faithful that is explicitly mentioned regarding the lay faithful in Canon 225, § 1, and again confirming this in the beginning explanation on Associations of Christ’s faithful in Canon 299, § 1.

It is important to remember that the right of association is in relation to the intended goal that must be an *ecclesial goal*, that is in conformity to the nature of the Church, as stated in Canon 298, § 1 which refers to fostering a more perfect life, promoting public worship or Christian teaching, other works of the apostolate, initiatives for evangelization, works of piety or charity, and those which animate the temporal order with the Christian spirit.

2. Various types of Associations according to ecclesial law

First and foremost, it is obvious that there are numerous *descriptions* of the associative characteristic. The Pastoral Letter of 22 May 1981 from the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI) (therefore before the promulgation of Canon Law) on “Ecclesial Criteria of Groups, Movements and Associations of the Faithful within the Church” was already making reference to associations, movements, groups, societies and communities.¹ On the other hand, the Code always uses the

¹ Cf. Text in *Enchiridion CEI* 3/587-612. After the promulgation of the Code of Canon Law in 1983 and the Apostolic Exhortation “Christifideles Laici” of 30 December 1988, the Episcopal Commission for the

word “consociatio,” that is “associations,” with a description given in Canon 298, § 1: “In the Church there are associations which are distinct from institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life. In these associations, Christ’s faithful, whether clerics or laity, or clerics and laity together, strive with a common effort to foster a more perfect life, or to promote public worship or Christian teaching. They may also devote themselves to other works of the apostolate, such as initiatives for evangelization, works of piety or charity, and those which animate the temporal order with the Christian spirit.”

2.2. Within this unique juridical term, that touches upon the full reality, there exists a *fundamental distinction between public and private associations*:

Public means “associations erected by ecclesiastical authority in order to attain the institutional goals of the Church, who are part of her hierarchical structure and act in the name of this same authority.”² Along with this definition is § 3 of Canon 301 that indicates the establishment of associations by the competent ecclesiastical authority (subjective criteria), and §§ 1 and 2 of the same canon that address a list of purposes for which such associations may be established (objective criteria).

By virtue of the decree of establishment, public associations are constituted as a juridical person (Canon 313).³ Obviously this is referring to the public juridical personality.

From all of this one could “assume that in reality the number of public associations would be minimal.”⁴ In reality the Code of 1983 limited the purposes of public associations “leaving them hardly any possibility for existence.”⁵

laity of CEI issued a new Pastoral Letter on 29 April 1993 on “Lay Associations in the Church” (in *Enchiridion CEI* 5/1544-1621).

² Giuliani Paolo, *La distinzione fra associazioni pubbliche e associazioni private dei fedeli nel nuovo Codice di Diritto Canonico*, Rome 1986, p.208; cf. also, p. 217. According to a commonly accepted interpretation the classic expression “agere nomine ecclesiae” must be read as “agere nomine auctoritatis ecclesiasticae.” The author adds two important considerations: the first is that “the term *public* signifies *hierarchy* because it makes reference to the public authority and its activity.” The second is that “the definition given to public associations implies the assertion of the true effect of the goal in their determination. The ecclesiastical authority, therefore, cannot establish associations with just any goal, but may only establish associations that, according to Canon 301, § 1, pursue, in its name, institutional goals, that is goals only within their competence.” But § 2 of Canon 301 seems to contradict this. That is why the author holds “the opportunity for the authority not to apply this paragraph such as it is, promoting instead instituting associations of the faithful with the same goal as private associations...” (p.208).

³ To learn more concerning juridical persons, their nature, constitution, rights and responsibilities, manner of acting, etc., cf. Canons 113, § 2, and 114 to 123.

⁴ Giuliani P., *op. cit.*, p. 210.

⁵ Giuliani P., *op. cit.*, p. 218. The author admits being unable to name any public association, therefore putting in doubt the term public for any association that claims itself as such in the decree of establishment.

Private means associations established by the individual initiative of the faithful (Canon 299, § 1) (subjective criteria) for purposes within their competence (objective criteria). They remain private even if they are praised, commended or recognized by ecclesiastical authority (Canon 299, §§ 2 and 3), and even if they have statutes approved by ecclesiastical authority and enjoy juridical personality (Canon 322). Private associations have a great deal of internal autonomy and always act under their own name while always remaining subject to the watchful eye of ecclesiastical authority.⁶

According to some authors, one can determine five authoritatively recognized levels of associations, only touching upon public associations of the Code in the last one:

- associations about which authority has not expressed judgment (“*implicite recognitae*”);
- associations praised or recommended (“*laudatae vel commendatae*”);
- associations expressly recognized (“*explicite agnitae*”);
- associations chosen and promulgated in a particular way (“*electae et particulari modo promotae*”);
- associations directly established by the hierarchy.⁷

2.3. How should associations erected under the previous legislation be considered? It is obvious that with the Code of 1983 associations of the faithful moved to a new system of regulation within the Church. That is why, in order to classify associations erected under the preceding legislation, one must apply the criteria relevant to the new legislation. It follows that “associations *erected (erectae)* by ecclesial authority up until 26 November 1983 are not automatically considered public, as such terminology was foreign to the Code of 1917. Since one must apply the criteria of the Code of 1983 to these associations, it follows that many *erected* associations — which for us is the majority — should be declared private by the competent ecclesial authority.”⁸

2.4. The private nature of a large number of associations should not be cause for admiration nor cause for concern. This is normal, a sign of the boldness of the faithful. It is an expression of lived subsidiarity. The categories “public” and “private” are not indicators of more or less importance or value. The fact that an association is private rather than public does not touch upon its being or

⁶ Cf. the specific definition of private association in Giuliani P., *op cit.*, p. 217. The 1993 CEI Pastoral Letter already cited distinguishes between private associations “*de facto*,” private associations recognized by authority, and public associations, while enumerating the conditions for their recognition. (*Enchiridion CEI* 5/1584-1591).

⁷ Coccopalmerio F., cited by Giuliani P., *op cit.*, p. 157. Within parentheses I have indicated terminology used by other authors (cf., pp. 206 – 207).

⁸ Giuliani P., *op cit.*, p. 217, note 2. To be honest, a statement from an ecclesial authority is not necessary. It suffices to correctly apply the criteria given in the Code.

belonging to the Church. It only serves to specify its identity, its state. Being “public” logically carries a more direct link to the hierarchy and stricter control on its part. In fact, a public association is erected by the hierarchy, enacts goals linked, by its nature, to the hierarchy and acts in its name.

2.5. It is important to note that an association can be: *common to all the faithful*, lay and clerical (this is the general case); *clerical*, if it is directed by clerics, implying the exercise of sacred orders and acknowledged as such by competent authority (Canon 302); or *lay only* (cf. Canons 327-329).⁹

2.6. The Code also recalls those “Associations whose members live in the world but share in the spirit of some religious institute, under the overall direction of the same institute, and who lead an apostolic life and strive for Christian perfection...” (Canon 303). This refers to what are called “third orders.”

2.7. And finally, it is well to note that only ecclesial authority may deem an association as *Catholic* (Canon 300).

3. Ecclesiastical Assistant. It is worth taking the time to say a few words outlining the method of choosing an Assistant and his/her role in the life of the association.

3.1. Methods of choosing vary according to the type of Association

- Within *public associations* it is the ecclesiastical authority itself that names the chaplain or the ecclesiastical assistant, after consulting, if opportune, those in charge of the association (Canon 317, § 1).
- Within *private associations*, the assistant is chosen by the association itself, but the choice must be confirmed by the local Ordinary (Canon 324, § 2).
- Within *associations erected by members of Religious Institutes by virtue of an apostolic privilege*: regarding associations erected outside of their own churches or houses, the norms for public associations apply; for associations erected within their own church or house, the nomination or confirmation of the assistant comes from the superior of the Institute according to their statutes (cf. canon 317, § 2).

3.2. Even the role of the assistant within the association can vary, as is expressed in the very terms used to designate this individual. The Code speaks

⁹ Perhaps another subdivision of associations may be introduced according as they place themselves at the level of the universal Church or particular Churches (international, national, diocesan, etc.). At any rate it is good to specify that the internationality of an association not be confused with its public character (cf. Giuliani P., *op cit.*, p. 216, note 1).

of a chaplain or an assistant. The previously mentioned CEI letter of 1981 refers to councillor, expert and assistant, adding that “this distinction undoubtedly indicates different levels of relationship between the ecclesial authority and the association (minimal in the case of a councillor, maximal in the case of an assistant) and at the same time corresponds to the diverse purpose and forms that the associations present...”¹⁰ The 1993 CEI letter refers only to “assistants or ecclesiastical consultants” (n. 47) and refers back to the document “Priests in Associations of the Faithful” by the Pontifical Council for the Laity, 4 August 1981.¹¹

Above and beyond the terms used, it can be said that the role of the assistant is not a role of directing but more a role of spiritual animation and an ecclesial link. We can use the expressions found in the Final Document of the October 2001 Meeting of the Association of the Miraculous Medal held in Rome: “1. The ministry of an adviser is to care for the spirit and the purposes of the Association, to promote formation, to encourage caring relationships, to maintain an attitude of listening, and to facilitate dialogue and discernment; 2. An authentic advisor of the groups serves as a companion both to the members and to the group, promoting growth, dynamism, and creativity; 3. The good adviser will always be a humble and simple servant.”¹²

II. Vincentian Associations

1. Association of the Miraculous Medal (AMM)

1.1 History

The first “Association of the Holy Medal of the Immaculate Conception” was founded in Paris and was approved for Paris by the Holy See in 1847. Worldwide recognition of the Association was received with the approbation of its purpose and Statutes on 8 July 1909 by Pope Pius X.¹³

The Association’s Statutes were modified in 1990 and then approved by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life by the decree of 8 September 1990.¹⁴ On 14 September of the same year, the Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments approved the new texts for the Blessing and Imposition of the Medal of the Blessed Virgin Mary Immaculate.¹⁵ The current Statutes were approved by the Congregation for

¹⁰ *Enchiridion CEI* 3/609, note 9.

¹¹ *Enchiridion Vaticanum* 7/1344-1383.

¹² *Vincentiana*, 2001, 477.

¹³ Cf. Shelby C., “The Association of the Miraculous Medal,” in *Vincentiana*, 1998, 312.

¹⁴ Cf. *Vincentiana*, 1991, 2-4.

¹⁵ Cf. *Vincentiana*, 1991, 5-13.

Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life by decree of 19 February 1998.¹⁶

1.2. What type of association is it?

* It is an association of the faithful, whose *Statutes* were submitted to the supreme Authority of the Church, who examined them, approved them and also approved the ensuing modifications.¹⁷

* It is an association *recognized* by the universal Church with ramifications in various countries and dioceses.

*It is an association with a *spiritual purpose* of devotion to Mary, sanctification of its members and an apostolate of charity (Article 2).

* Its Director General is the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity (Article 3, § 1), who has the responsibility of naming the Directors and National Presidents (Article 3, § 2).

* After all that has been said, it seems that we can conclude that, according to current Canon Law, it is a *private association*.¹⁸

2. International Association of Charities (AIC)

This is an international association with philanthropic, religious and educational goals, which groups together associations or federations of associations, of women or men and women, founded by St. Vincent de Paul or those that refer to his tradition.¹⁹ It is a member of the International Catholic

¹⁶ Cf. *Vincentiana*, 1998, 79-82.

¹⁷ The current Statutes were approved by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. Why were they not approved by other organisms of the Apostolic See, for example, the Pontifical Council for the Laity? Probably because the Statutes concern an Association directly linked to two Societies of Apostolic Life (Congregation of the Mission and Company of the Daughters of Charity) and they are considered almost as coming forth from them.

¹⁸ The Statutes of the AMM in *Chile* (Art. 1) state that it is “a public Association within the Church approved by the Roman Pontiff on 8 July 1909.” Does public here mean that it was approved by the Roman Pontiff? Does pontifical approbation change the private juridical nature of an association? In some descriptive leaflets of the Association in *Spain*, it is referred to as “a public Church association to which all faithful Christians of whatever condition may belong”; it is also affirmed that it was “founded by Pius IX on 21 June 1847” (but limited to the CM Motherhouse in Paris); it is affirmed that “Pope St. Pius X, on 8 July 1909, erected the Association of the Immaculate Conception of the Holy Medal, with a definitive and universal character, for the entire Church.” The *Mexican* Statutes are limited to stating that it is “a Catholic Lay Association, born out of the apparitions of the Blessed Virgin to St. Catherine Labouré in 1830...; it was approved and recognized by the entire Church ... through the Brief *Dilectus Dei Filius* of Pius X on 8 July 1909” (Art. 1). But then it refers to the Brief of Pius X as the “Foundational Brief” (Art. 1.1).

If we want to keep to the Documents cited, what would the results be? That the Association of the Miraculous Medal came out of Paris through the private initiative of the Priests of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, that it was recognized and approved at first for Paris by Pius IX, and then it was recognized and approved for the entire Church by St. Pius X. But it seems to me that one cannot say that it was founded or established by a Pope and refer to the Brief of St. Pius X as a “Foundational Brief.”

¹⁹ Thus states Article 1 of the Statutes. We find another reference to St. Vincent in Article 3 which, speaking of the purpose of the Association, says: “The AIC shall have as objective the advancement and development of the underprivileged, the combat against all material, physical, moral and spiritual forms

Organizations (O.I.C.). The current Statutes were approved by the Assembly of Delegates in 1985. We do not find any mention of an Assistant in them. However, he is spoken of in the Statutes or in other norms at national. Let us take the example of Italy. The “Statutes of the Vincentian Volunteers Groups”²⁰ are limited to saying that the Vincentian Volunteer “works in communion with Church pastors, recognizes the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission as the Assistant General of the Association, the Priests of the Mission as animators of Vincentian spirituality and the Daughters of Charity as its historical and natural collaborators” (Art. 2). The “Internal Norms”²¹ instead often refer to the Spiritual Assistant. He, “associated with the Council on various levels” and “preferably a Missionary of St. Vincent,” has the spiritual animation of the Groups (Art. 15). On the National Level, the “Spiritual Assistant is a Missionary of St. Vincent chosen by the Superior General, in accord with the National President” (Art. 16).

On the ecclesial level, the AIC is considered a “private association.”²² In order to know more about its ecclesial profile, we would have to go back to the origins of the “Confraternities of Charity” founded by St. Vincent and tightly inserted into the ecclesial context through the parameters of the law at that time,²³ to all the tradition that links it in a special way to the apostolate of the Priests of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, and to the episcopal and pontifical approbations.²⁴

3. International Association of Vincentian Marian Youth (JMV)

The current Statutes assert that the International Association of Vincentian Marian Youth is the new form of the Association of Children of Mary Immaculate which had its origin in the Apparitions of the Virgin Mary to St. Catherine Labouré in 1830 (Art. 1). This Association was approved by Pope

of poverty and suffering in any country whatsoever as well as in international life, without political or religious discrimination. AIC thus witnesses to the Charity of Christ in the tradition of St Vincent de Paul.”

²⁰ *Statuto dei Gruppi di Volontariato Vincenziano*, AIC Italy, approved by the National Council on 25 May 1995.

²¹ *Norme interne dei Gruppi di Volontariato Vincenziano*, AIC Italy, approved by the National Council on 4 October 1996, with some modifications on 15 May 2001.

²² Cf. Giuliani P., *op. cit.*, p. 209, note 324.

²³ Cf. Vernaschi A., “Una isituzione originale: le Figlie della Carità di S. Vincenzo de’ Paoli,” in *Annali della Missione*, 75 (1968), pp. 132, 185-190, where both the origins of the Confraternities of Charity and their insertion into the juridical models of the time are taken into consideration.

²⁴ The Archbishop of Paris had already given the Priests of the Mission “potestatem et facultatem... erigendi confraternitatem Charitatis in quibus locis utile videbitur, et erectas visitandi” (SV XIII, 217). The Bull “Salvatoris nostri” of 12 January 1633, by which Urban VIII approved the Congregation of the Mission, enumerates among its ministries the institution of the Confraternities of Charity in the different locations where the Missionaries preach the Missions: “In locis ubi catechismi et praedicationis munus exerceuerint, confraternitates quas vocant Charitatis, Ordinarii auctoritatae, institui procurent, ut pauperibus aegrotis subveniatur...” (SV XIII, 260-261).

Pius IX in the rescripts of 20 June 1847 and 19 July 1850, and then confirmed by other dispositions of the Holy See (Art. 2).

These same Statutes show the Association's special bond with the Congregation of the Mission and with the Company of the Daughters of Charity through the Superior General of both communities. To him falls its general direction (Art. 3), with the consequent powers concerning the nomination of a Vice-Director General and of a General Councillor, as well as the confirmation of nominations on the national level, etc.²⁵ The fundamental characteristics of the Association are shown by the terms ecclesial, lay, Marian and Vincentian (Art. 5).²⁶

The "Statutes of the Marian Association," approved for Italy on 25 January 1996 by Fr. Robert Maloney, Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity and Director General of the Marian Association (formerly "Children of Mary Immaculate"), state in Article 27: "Based on Canon Law, the Association is numbered among the public associations of the faithful (Canons 301 and 312)."²⁷

But is it truly a public association in the sense as discussed in section I. 2.2 above? The question must be asked. Personally, I am of the opposite opinion based on what was said in section I. 2.3.

4. Society of St. Vincent de Paul (SSVP)

Founded in Paris in 1833 by Frederick Ozanam and his companions as a "Conference of Charity," and immediately afterwards called "Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul," from 8 December 1835 the Conferences were named globally the "Society of St. Vincent de Paul." But the groups that make up the Society continue to call themselves "Conferences." The Society was recognized by the Holy See in the Papal Brief of Gregory XVI on 10 January 1845. The members take inspiration from the thoughts and actions of St. Vincent and personally commit themselves, in a spirit of justice and charity, in favor of those who suffer.

²⁵ Even the Statutes of the Italian "Marian Association" emphasize the bonds with the Daughters of Charity and the Priests of the Mission (Arts. 3-6, 15-16, 22, etc.).

²⁶ Cf. *Vincentiana*, 1999, 89-97. These are the same characteristics also found within the AMM as was brought out during the October 2001 Meeting in Rome.

²⁷ One understands this form of expression, given that Article 5 says that "On 20 June 1847, at the request of Fr. Aladel and Fr. Étienne, Pope Pius IX granted, by rescript, to the Priests of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity the canonical erection and the faculty to institute the Association in their own schools and works, under the title of the Most Holy Immaculate Virgin" and page 253 of the source from which this is taken is cited: *Acta Apostolica in gratiam Congregationis Missionis*, published in Paris in 1876. Nevertheless, when referring to "canonical establishment," we find ourselves in a different context than that of the Code of 1983.

The structure of the Society, inserted within the Church, makes provision for the frequent participation of a member of the clergy for all that concerns the spiritual and moral aspects of its life. This person is called a “Spiritual Councillor.” Methods of nomination may vary: the Spanish Statutes provide that the National Religious Councillor be named directly by the President of the Society (Art. 43). The Italian “Statutes of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul” state that among the various Councils (local, central, regional, and national), there must “be a priest with the responsibility of being the Spiritual Councillor” (Art. 21). Regarding his nomination, Article 41 provides that he be “chosen in a timely manner from among the secular or regular priests, in accord with the competent religious authority.”²⁸

According to the criteria indicated in sections I. 2.2 and 2.3, this is a private association of the faithful.

5. Vincentian Lay Missionaries (MISEVI)

The Decree of Approbation of 7 April 1999 expressly states that “the work called *Vincentian Lay Missionaries* (MISEVI) is an international public association of the faithful who desire to share the charism and spirituality of St. Vincent de Paul, founder of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, adapting them to the state of life of the members of the said Association,” and Article 1.1 of the Statutes affirms that “the Association of Vincentian Lay Missionaries (MISEVI) is canonically erected as a Public Association of the Faithful having full autonomous juridical personality.”²⁹

This is the only case of a Vincentian Association wherein it is explicitly expressed that it is a *Public Association*. But ... is it truly a Public Association in the sense of the 1983 Canon Law? In spite of the explicit terms of the Decree, the question could be legitimate, based on all the considerations made in sections I. 2.2 and 2.3.

The characteristics of this Association clearly emerge from the Statutes that also indicate the relationship (juridical or not) with the Vincentian Family, in particular with the Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity through the Superior General of both Communities.³⁰

Appendix: Some notes on the statutes of our associations

²⁸ Cf., The notes and Statutes in *Vademecum del Vincenziano*, published in July 2000 by the Italian National Council of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

²⁹ Cf., “International Association of MISEVI” in *Vincentiana*, 1999, 150-159. Cf., the observation in footnote 17 of the present study: the same reasoning may also be applied to MISEVI.

³⁰ Cf. “International Statutes of the Vincentian Lay Missionaries (MISEVI),” Article 9 and numerous other references in various articles.

Before concluding, I would like to add some complementary general notes relating to the Statutes of our Associations.

1. Regarding the international associations, the Statutes of some of the Vincentian Associations (AMM, JMV, MISEVI) were presented by the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity to the Apostolic See and were approved and confirmed by it. The Local or National Statutes are proposed to the Superior General and approved by him.

Other associations are in this more autonomous with respect to the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

2. As I stated above, the approbation of the Statutes by the competent authority of the Church does not change the juridical nature of the Association, which remains private.

3. On the level of *content* and *style*, the Statutes must be a basic text and consequently brief, which are limited to outlining the fundamental and lasting elements: the purpose, the government (leadership), membership, and the rights and responsibilities of the members, etc. The rest, that is anything more detailed, more particular, more transitory, should be placed appropriately in another text, for example: the Rules, Directory, etc., unless it is necessary to add other elements to the Statutes because they are required by national legislation in order to obtain civil juridical recognition and consequently the juridical capacity to receive, possess and administer goods.

In this regard, we can see that some National Statutes appear too detailed while others are too basic.

Conclusion

The Statutes are a means and not an end: the law is necessary, to safeguard life, but the essential is life. The public or private categories could be useful in presenting the reality of the Association, but what counts is the ecclesial communion and apostolic fruitfulness that such a reality represents and promotes. With their character which is essentially ecclesial, missionary, Marian and Vincentian for the apostolate of evangelization and charity, Vincentian Associations have been and continue to be a means, ever so simple, but serious and effective, for personal sanctification and for the mission of the Church. That is why all of this is close to our hearts!

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

Sharing the Experience of the Vincentian Month

*by Benjamin Romo, C.M.
Delegate for the Vincentian Family
25.VII.2002*

We have arrived at the end of this first **Vincentian Month** for Vincentian Family Advisors. We have worked together for three weeks and have shared many experiences in an atmosphere of simplicity, family and joy. We are surely beginning now to feel the need to return home and share our experiences.

The days spent in Paris have not let us forget the situations of our countries. On the contrary, we have shared who we are and what we do. It is now time to return to our missions where the Vincentian laity, our brothers and sisters in community as well as the poor await us in order to continue our service.

Before beginning our work this morning we need to ask ourselves: What have I received from this Vincentian Month? What do I have to share with the members of the Vincentian Family and the poor? How can I share with them what we have lived out during this meeting?

I would like to suggest the following **objective** for this morning's work: determine concrete actions through which we can transmit this experience in our own countries. In being good news for our brothers and sisters, this good news must be communicated. Bad news comes by itself ... and it is said that that is all there is. What we have experienced during this Session is good news and we should not hide it or keep it to ourselves, if so we will lose it for we manage to keep only what is given to us.

Mary is an example of this. In the silence of prayer, she welcomed God's gift by accepting to be the Mother of the Eternal Word in an attitude of servant. This is very important news. It is "the news." And the gospels tell us that she left in haste to meet her cousin, thereby allowing Elizabeth and John the Baptist to share in her joy.

The witness of the apostles also crosses my mind. They lived with Jesus who formed them and shared with them through his words and actions the Good News that God is Father. In the end he confided his mission to them: "Go out into the world and announce the Good News...." He made them participants and successors in his salvific mission for humanity. Yet, after his death, they became fugitives gripped by fear. When they received the good news of the Resurrection, their lives were changed, no longer fearful in the face of threats and death. They were not the same ... they became courageous people, witnesses of the supreme "news": the Resurrection of Jesus.

All during these days we have experienced and shared much good news. We have also been friends of God's good news. God once again told us that we, ourselves, are good news for our brothers and sisters. Welcome this good news and allow it to transform, convert and change our mentality, our hearts ... and equally become multiplying agents of the good news.

Fr. Maloney, at the beginning of this meeting, told us something very important: **A good formator is a good communicator**. We are formators, that is, "experts in the Vincentian charism" in order to share it with our brothers and sisters. Sharing this meeting implies taking on new attitudes. What are these **attitudes**? I will cite a few:

- Being **creative and inventive** missionaries for our brothers and sisters. We need a new perception of charity. An authentic passion for God is bound to translate into sincere compassion for the brother or sister who is poor. How can I take this news to my own country?
- Having the courage to **take on new dispositions and attitudes** in order to live out our relationship with the laity and our commitment close to the poor — especially attentive listening and the humility of those who know that all in life is gift and that we need each other. Willing to courageously wager new pathways in order to meet the poor and new places that allow the laity to live out their vocation of service to the poor.
- Continuing to **take on and incarnate** in our lives the new materials received during this Session. All that we have heard these days has been wonderful and has surely touched our hearts. But let us allow these truths time to achieve their transforming work. We continue to note all that we have seen and heard here, from the bottom of our hearts.

Also as Advisors of Vincentian Family Groups we have discovered some **challenges**. I will list four of them:

1. *Make ministry with young people and laity a priority among the priorities of our other ministries.* This priority is not yet an effective reality within the ministries and services of numerous provinces or communities; maybe it has only reached being affective. Often service of the laity "is tolerated," it is not done with conviction but through devotion. A large number of our brothers and sisters work with the laity as non-professionals "because they enjoy it" and not because it is a provincial or community choice. This is our challenge: What can we do so that this work with the laity, especially with young people, becomes a serious option and that it have human and financial resources devoted to it?

2. *Form laity at the heart of the Association so they may become Group Advisors of their brothers and sisters.* The Advisor's function is a ministry that the laity also has a right to exercise; in fact, there are many who are already doing it. We,

CMs and DCs, cannot monopolize this ecclesial ministry at the core of the Vincentian Family. In addition, we are not able to do everything. Our challenge: What can we do so the laity can receive formation and become Advisors of their Groups?

3. *Organize CM and DC Provincial or Regional formation meetings.* There are many brothers and sisters in our countries and provinces who are working with Vincentian Family Groups just as we do. During these days we have noted that we have great cultural variety and that situations, as well as the social and political problems of our countries, are very different. The history of the Vincentian Family itself, in our countries, has followed different growth and organizational processes. A challenge for us, is to duplicate what we have lived out here. Would it be possible to organize a seminar for one or two weeks, in our respective countries, in order to reflect together on our role as Vincentian Family accompaniers? And another challenge would be: How can we inculturate the Vincentian Charism within our realities?

4. *Continue our own formation and updating.* During these days we have seen that various Vincentian Associations are finding themselves in an ongoing process of renewal and updating. All of this because they want to be a current response to today's reality. We know that one Vincentian Association did not exist ten years ago. The Associations renew themselves. New formation documents are developed as well as guidelines for Advisors and current documents of lay Vincentian spirituality. New apostolates and new internal organizations have been created. We have not exhausted our understanding and knowledge of Vincentian Associations during this meeting. This reveals a challenge: What can we do to continue a serious process of ongoing formation? What means are available in order to continue to know and understand Vincentian Associations?

Sisters and brothers, today we are called to dream and to invent new paths. We are aware that we need a **“new perception of charity.”**

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

Homily for the Closing of the Vincentian Month

Chapel of St. Vincent — Paris, 26 July 2002

Readings: Isaiah 52:7-10; Luke 10:25-37

*by Benjamín Romo, C.M.
Vincentian Family Delegate*

My dear Brothers and Sisters,

We are at the close of this beautiful experience and are celebrating the Eucharist here in this Chapel before St. Vincent de Paul. This is a graced time granted to us by God as a gift of his love.

The parable

We have just heard the wonderful gospel parable of the Good Samaritan. It is the parable that best reflects the life and mission of Jesus. He is the Good Samaritan. St. Vincent, following the footsteps of Jesus, deeply integrated the attitudes of the Good Samaritan into his life. He, too, is the Good Samaritan who, in the same way as Jesus, “bent down,” reached out to the wounded man, cared for him and led him to others so that others could also provide care. The wounded man of the parable is symbolic of the millions of poor who have been left on the margins, in every sense of the word, along the road of life.

Brothers and sisters, for three weeks we have reflected upon our Vincentian missionary vocation within the Church and the world. We have also reflected upon our service of accompanying the laity of Vincentian Associations. Men and women who, in looking at the reality of those who are wounded, with faith in Jesus Christ and the manner of St. Vincent, strive to be “the Good Samaritans of today,” men and women who hasten to help the wounded stand up again in order to join in the pilgrimage of humanity as they journey to meet God the Father.

A brief look at the scene

A scribe meets Jesus and asks: What must I do to inherit everlasting life? to live in the fullness of life? The response is direct: You shall love the Lord your God and your neighbor as yourself. There is still another question: Who is my neighbor? This is a definitive question and by using simpler words it means the same as asking: Whom should I love? Jesus changes this into another question: Which one showed himself to be a neighbor? In this way, he led the scribe and he leads us to ask ourselves: Is my heart open to love? The focus of this parable is

the wounded man. A man went down, a man without a name, without identity, like thousands of people in our world who have no name and no identity. The first two passersby, the priest and the Levite, are associated with institutional religion. Consequently, the parable reveals that if religion is not united to solidarity and justice, it has no meaning. Religion without solidarity and justice has no meaning. The Samaritan “bent down” and this was not only a physical gesture but also an act of profound significance. This implies going down, being with, showing solidarity, closeness, being close even to someone we do not know, even someone whose name we do not know. The Samaritan, in approaching the victim, comes into solidarity with him. The parable shows us that there are different ways to place oneself in life and enter into relationship with others, such as assailants, fugitives, strangers or a person committed to others. Jesus praised only the attitude of the Samaritan and left a very clear message — be a Good Samaritan in life — “Go, and do the same yourself.”

The Samaritan, model of the genuine Christian

Who is the Good Samaritan? This is the person with a free heart, who goes beyond all conventions separating us from one another (labels, social classes, what people say...) in order to come near the wounded. This is the person with compassion, the one moved to pity and solidarity with the situation of the other. This is the person who is willing to become vulnerable because he or she is touched by the injustice toward others and suffers by love. This person takes on the wound of a brother or sister. *He approached him and dressed his wounds.* This is an attitude of nearness of one who discovers the problem, and faced with long and short-term solutions, begins by being present and responding directly and immediately.

... *He hoisted him on his own beast....* The Samaritan gave his own place to the other who was suffering. He touched reality with his own hands and became creative in looking for solutions to change the situation. This assumes being aware that one is on a journey and that personal response requires personal conversion. The Samaritan was moved by the encounter with the poor. If the life of the suffering poor does not cause us to get down from our horse, our service is worthless. Do we let ourselves be questioned?

... *He brought him to the inn where he cared for him ... he took out two silver pieces and gave them to the innkeeper....* The Good Samaritan understands that the “center of focus” is the wounded person on the side of the road. He knows how to take the focus off himself in order to spend and give of himself for the good of the wounded person. The Levite and priest believed themselves to be their own center of focus. The Samaritan breaks the cycle and the one who was on the margin became his center of focus. The Samaritan discovers God, the center of suffering humankind. He carries out two actions: care and

reimbursement for care. Furthermore, he lives an attitude of offering. He gives himself and spends himself. This is the power of the Incarnation.

... Look after him and if there is any further expense I will repay you on my way back.” Conditions of poverty exist because there are also conditions of wealth, but God does not want this. Social-structural sin weighs heavy on the shoulders of humankind, therefore, on our shoulders as well. If we are aware of the reality of suffering along the side of the road, we will not be satisfied to give a short-term response, but we will creatively look for long-term solutions, as did the Good Samaritan.

Called to be Good Samaritans today

Can we identify with the Good Samaritan? Jesus and St. Vincent invite us to incarnate this attitude, like them and with them. In our service of the laity, we are called not only to “bend down” and care for the wounded but also to help others, the laity, care for the wounded. It is for us to show one another the journey of service. Moreover, we see that God emphasizes the maximum, not the minimum. “He loved to the very end.” To believe in the gospel of Jesus, to be Vincentian, means to know how to go to the very end, to the very end of the journey. Let us go, my brothers and sisters, let us go and do what the Good Samaritan did. Let us go and be witnesses to justice; let us form others in justice and in a commitment to give their life for the poor. That is the mission of the Vincentian missionary and the Daughter of Charity today: to go and do what the Good Samaritan did because there is still much to be done. There are many wounded on the sides of our roads. We must help them get up because we all have the right to travel the path. May Jesus continue to show us the way and may St. Vincent intercede for us.

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

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)