

# Missionaries following christ the evangelizer of the poor (1)

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## Introduction

"We are possessed with a certain confidence about which we wish to speak to you. It is not a matter of denying the crisis going through our Church, not even our Church in France. But along with you as we meet you day after day we are ready to meet the challenges confronting us.

The principal challenge is that of proclaiming Christ. Along with yourselves, it is our task to announce Christ and to make the world a more humane place. That's why we are calling on you to come close to Him. And for you first of all to discover, in all freedom, through a reading of the Word of God and through prayer, the call which is being addressed to you. No announcing of the Gospel takes place without a profound spiritual renewal. That is why I am pointing to your responsibilities in the Church. You are the Church. Don't just look at it from the outside. You yourselves have been given the responsibilities".(2)

It is the bishops of France who are thus expressing themselves. I have focussed on this passage of their message directed to the young Catholics invited to the World Youth Days of 1997. Why? It seems to me to correspond with our preoccupation as Vincentians with the challenges of the world and our desire to respond to them at the dawn of the Twenty-First Century. I draw your attention to the key phrase: "*The principal challenge is how to proclaim Christ today.*"

This takes us to the heart of the themes of our General Assemblies:

that of the DCs: inculturation

that of the CMs: the Vincentian family and the challenges of the world.

Here we are right into our subject: *Popular Missions* (Parish Missions)

I'd like to share with you some convictions. They relate to the *spirit* which in my view ought to animate Vincentians in their lives and in their actions today, in the world and in the Church. And so I divide my remarks in to two parts:

1st part : Missionaries following Christ, the evangelizer of the poor (today's topic)

2nd part : What sort of Church to build? (topic for tomorrow)

This morning I propose to you the following procedure:

- 1) The distinctive approach taken by Jesus Christ, according to St Vincent;
- 2) A particular relationship with the poor.

First of all, something evident. Vincentians do not constitute a race apart, nor a category classified as "specialists" in mission and in charity. Vincentians are men, women, Christians. Also, Vincentians are not alone, nor are they the only ones to devote themselves to mission, to parish missions, to the poor, to the sick, to the excluded. Finally Vincentians are, in the main, men and women, young and less young when they are seen to include consecrated laity like the Daughters of Charity and the Brothers of the Mission, along with priests and religious. The Vincentian family with its different branches is in the Church and in the world of today. No need to argue about that.

They are in the world along with everybody else and if they are not there....well, what's wrong? For if the Vincentians are not in the world it's because they have understood nothing about their election , their vocation , their mission. On the contrary, it is most helpful to keep checking up on what way Vincentians are living out their presence in the world and in the Church. What spirit animates them? What dynamism directs their enterprises?

## **1 The distinctive approach taken by Jesus Christ according to St Vincent**

The reading and re-reading of St Vincent's writings never cease to impress me. Whether it be his correspondence, his conferences to the Daughters of Charity, his talks to the missionaries, the Common Rules of the CM which he himself drew up....What strikes me as the essential point is not so much M Vincent's sense of the poor person, but the distinctive approach taken by Jesus Christ. Who is more personally involved than he is in the world and in the Church of his time? Those men and women who in the most diverse areas of the world consecrate their lives to the poor , the sick, the distant missions, the popular missions?

M. Vincent's involvements are both diverse and multiple. They range from abandoned children to the Council of Conscience, from the animating of missionaries to that of the Daughters of Charity, from the directing of contemplative Sisters of the Visitation to galley slaves, from the formation of priests to parish missions. From 1617 until at least 1653 M. Vincent continued to preach missions and when his health no longer permitted him to do this, he never gave up his longing to be out giving missions.(3) That's not all. M. Vincent was still concerned about missions in Europe and even beyond (Tunis 1645; Algiers 1646, Madagascar 1648....), visits to refugees during the Thirty Years War and all those hours spent on affairs of administration, finance, commerce, legal matters....All these enterprises are directed by M. Vincent without his treading on the heels of Providence, because they are necessary in the service of the poor. Yes certainly, but the more profound reason is because he knows himself to be chosen, called, sent "to do what our Lord himself did and wants us to do: evangelize the poor (1658)". Like Jesus we belong to God and not to ourselves. To Anthony Portail he writes:

*Remember, Father, that 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 that our life should be hidden in Jesus Christ and full of Jesus Christ; and that to die like Jesus Christ it is necessary to live like Jesus Christ. (4)*

(You'd think that this was a text of St Augustine). Eight times there occurs the name Jesus Christ in this statement. Four times there is the word *life* and three times the word *death*. And there are the interchangeable link words *:in, through, like* which enable the text to be turned in every direction.

All M. Vincent's letters begin with the formula: The grace of our Lord be with you! It is not rare that in the course of a letter or the middle of a conference M. Vincent recalls a gospel phrase, and example of Jesus. With regard to anything or even nothing he quotes (sometimes even implicitly) a saying of our Lord.

Christ therefore is the centre of the life, the thought and the actions of M.Vincent. Deeply involved in the world and in the Church of his time, M Vincent lives, like Teresa of Avila, in the "divine milieu". He is in total and constant familiarity with our Lord Jesus Christ.

The specific approach of Jesus Christ which characterises M. Vincent is that Jesus whom he follows is the missionary of the Father and the evangelizer of the poor (Lk 4). The following of Christ (Sequela Christi) is the proper task of all the baptised who are called to sanctity on becoming disciples (5), as Vatican II affirms. To put Christ at the centre, at the heart of one's life is the characteristic of the saints, canonized or not.

There is a Vincentian approach to Jesus Christ, but unlike the Franciscan, Ignatian, Bérullian approach, M.Vincent doesn't construct a systematic spirituality. He looks at Jesus Christ in his mission:

"If we ask our Lord: "What did you come on earth to do? To bring help to the poor.....anything else?"and constantly to cite Luke 4,13...which is Jesus's first homily in the synagogue in Nazareth on the sabbath, based on the text of Isaiah 60 : "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me and has sent me to evangelize the poor: the lame walk, etc. And rolling up the book again, Jesus concludes: "Today this passage of scripture is being fulfilled in your ears."(6)

The Christ of M.Vincent is the Christ the evangelizer of the poor. All his undertakings have meaning, value, only because M.Vincent knows himself, wills himself, sees himself as elected, called, sent "to do what our Lord did: "Announce the Good News to the poor". That the Gospel should meet up with the poor not only in words but in facts. "To evangelize", he said, "is to make the Gospel *effective*." This specific approach of Christ the evangelizer of the poor is, it seems to me, the key to the spiritual experience of M.Vincent because it is at the heart of his human experience.

Have you noticed that the life of M.Vincent is made up of two clearly equal periods: before 1617 and after 1617.

By way of synthesizing my thoughts I will say that before 1617 Vincent was involved with putting God into his affairs, and that after 1617 he was putting himself resolutely into God's affairs. This is admittedly a formula, but I want to say that M. Vincent -- like every Gospel missionary -- makes at first tentative moves; that events, persons, "mediations" begin to come into play and allow a deepening of personal experience. That's what happened for the apostles who were called to follow Christ. They followed Jesus of Nazareth with generosity, fervour, confidence, but also they had doubts, with grave crises (Jn 6), with incomprehension, with fears, and also with ambitions. M. Vincent chose the ecclesiastical state seriously, generously. He followed our Lord because that was of use to him. He was a little like John and James, the Boanerges, who coveted the first places, an honourable retirement. He likewise did not know what he was asking. But events were to act as revelatory: with the accusation of theft M.Vincent experienced being excluded. With the temptations against faith, M. Vincent experienced Peter's walking on the waters; he doubts because his basis of support is within himself. It is when he gives himself to God that he begins to get himself gradually pulled together. Encounters: Bèrulle, Francis de Sales, etc.; personalities, the de Gondis, decisive events like those of 1617. Gannes-Folleville which is the encounter with spirituality and the putting down the roots of the Mission. Châtillon which is the encounter with material poverty and the founding of the works of charity. These two poles of Mission and Charity are as it were magnets drawing together all the rest: Mme de Gondi's foundations(7), the Institution of the Congregation of the Mission (1625), the ordinands (1628), the Company of the Daughters of Charity (1633); etc. It is the same M. Vincent; yet it is another M.Vincent. Just as the apostles who followed Jesus of Nazareth are the same; yet they are also different when they are following the risen Christ. They are different while remaining themselves when they go off as missionaries. An episode like the calming of the sea (Mk 4, 35...) is in this respect significant. After his own "popular mission" at

the lakeside, Jesus embarked with his disciples and laid down for a rest in the stern. The wind arose; a storm broke out; panic took over! "Master, save us, we're perishing". "Why are you afraid, people of little faith"! Then rising to his feet he commanded the sea and the wind and there was made a great calm. Who is he whom the sea and the wind obey?

How can you get someone to believe that these fishing mariners (sailors) could be afraid on this lake which was their own instrument of work and the background of their life? Why then are they afraid? When Mark and the other evangelists relate this episode of the calming of the storm, the Church is being persecuted and evangelization is becoming a high-risk mission. The Risen Christ who has promised his presence to those gathered in his name is very absent. The Church and its missionaries feel themselves alone and abandoned. Now, Jesus, before getting into the boat has clearly said: "Let's go to the other side! And it is this journey to the other side which causes fear. The other side is that of the pagans, of the stranger, of the unknown. As long as the disciples were physically with Jesus they were something of "followers" but now to follow Christ is to get committed to serving the Gospel even by going to the pagans. As long as the ship is navigating close to the shore and remains in home waters it can feel secure because it is in the midst of familiar ways, and that brings comfort through its certitudes. But to launch out into the deep and cast out its nets!

That's what Jesus gave Peter to understand in the episode at Caesarea related in Mt 16,13ff. Jesus is checking out what people are saying about him. "For the people, who am I?" The reply seems to point in the right direction: Jesus appears to be a great prophet. But Jesus raises the question: "For you, who am I?" Peter, speaking on behalf of the others, replies with the confession of faith: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God". And Peter, by way of congratulations receives the blessing of the beatitude: "Blessed are you, Simon Bar Jonah! It's not you who are the source of this revelation. It's my Father".

Then Jesus announces his passion, trial, cross, resurrection. Peter remonstrates (like a bodyguard who protects his master by moving in front of him): "That musn't happen to you". Then the reply of Jesus is shattering: "That is not what my Father revealed to you! That's something you've found by yourself alone! Get behind me, *Satan!*"(8) Peter loves Jesus and wants to take on himself alone the mission of Jesus and in the place of Jesus. Jesus puts Peter back into his place as disciple: one who follows. Jesus.

When Matthew and the other evangelists relate this episode, the Church is in the situation of a persecuted community. It cannot rest satisfied with a simple verbal expression of faith (as Peter did before Jesus of Nazareth); what is required now is an active profession of faith which shows belief (to make believing one's personal job, or profession of faith) faced with the cross and death before being resurrected with Christ in glory.

To follow Christ, for missionaries, is to engage oneself in evangelization *as, with, through, in Jesus*. That is when the Apostles re-actualise, re-activate what they have lived out with Jesus. What they have seen, heard, touched of the *Word of life*, that's what they announce. They stir up their memories in order to make an anamnesis. Their memories are made to recall the life, the words, the actions of Jesus and through the power of the Spirit they discover how they should live and speak and act. When they were following Jesus of Nazareth along the roads of Galilee and of Judea, they had witnessed many events... they had the chance of receiving from Jesus himself the explanations of the teachings given in parables. But above all they discover the meaning, the value, the extent of the teachings of Jesus when he was himself taking in hand their

own special formation after they had asked him: "Master, where do you live?" - "Come and see. They went in and stayed with him" (Jn 1,35 -39) (9)

At this stage in my reflexions I would like to draw your attention to a few points:

1 Up to the XVIth century the word "mission" was used exclusively with regard to the doctrine of the Trinity, in the sense of the sending of the Son by the Father and the sending of the Holy Spirit by the Father and the Son. It was from the XVIth century onwards that the Church began using the word to designate its action in announcing the Gospel both to the faithful and to outsiders. It was then that one spoke of popular mission and of propagation of the faith.

2 St Vincent sets the roots of mission and charity within the mystery of the most Holy Trinity because this is strongly noted in his spiritual experience through his baptism. This for two reasons, in my view.

The first reason is that, on giving himself to God, he is giving himself to all that God is: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. You will notice that St Vincent insists a lot on Providence, on the link between Jesus and his Father, on the obedience of Jesus to the will of the Father, on prayer. And he regularly refers to the Holy Trinity in order to situate mission and charity. (10)

The second reason is that St Vincent always worked with lay people in all the undertakings of the mission and of charity. This was right from Gannes, Folleville and Châtillon. In addition to his teams (Priests of the Mission, Daughters of Charity, Ladies of Charity...) he imposes a link between *mission* and *charity*. Not one without the other, because the two enterprises are at the heart of the *Yes* to God. The mission should have as a result the setting up of a charity and the activities should have an evangelising value. That is to say they ought to tend to the development and to the salvation of the entire person including his spiritual dimension. This is a characteristic of the approach of Christ the evangeliser of the poor.

I insist on this baptismal character because, as a rule, when there is mention of missionaries following Christ, reference is bound to be made to the experience of the Apostles. But here the argument is based on the Fourth Gospel and especially on the discourse after the Last Supper. So much so that the missionaries appear to be only the apostles or the disciples. This is to forget that behind these New Testament texts there are existing Christian communities which are "missionaries". A consideration of the letters to the Churches in the Apocalypse would facilitate an escaping from the problem of reserving mission to certain individuals or types of witness in the Church.

Let's not forget that St Vincent, while respecting their own particular vocation, addressed his remarks to the Brothers as well as to the Priests of the Mission, and that, in the matter of essentials, these have the same application to the Daughters of Charity. For him the mission is not the reserve of specialist missionaries who have been given an ordained ministry. Mission is an obligation on all, for it inheres in the identity of the Church as it does in that of Jesus. The Church is the People of God on mission to the people. And so, baptised into Christ, it is in Christ that we have been baptised. Missionaries must therefore faithfully reproduce the vocation of the Son of God. More than that. In order the better to imitate Jesus -- on whom Vincent bestows the paschal title Our Lord -- we must identify with Him; live in Him, through Him, with Him so that it should be his Spirit that would be the dynamic of our participation in evangelisation: Our Lord is the *Rule* of the Mission.

Missionaries following Christ means therefore seeking to be more and more disciples of Christ in order to announce the Gospel more effectively. No missionaries without union with Christ, who is the incarnation of that Charity which is God. (11) Vincentians are chosen, called,

sent in order to be prophets who proclaim by their words, by their life, by their commitments that they belong to God and not to themselves, just as Christ doesn't come to do his own will but that of the Father with whom he is one. The dynamic of their apostolic life is: Our Lord Jesus Christ, the missionary of the Father "who became poor to enrich us through his poverty". (Col. 1,25-28).

### **A particular relationship with the poor**

I intend the word "poor" to be taken in the singular and in the plural. The poor continue to multiply infinitely, yet each poor person is loved for their own sake. Whether it's a group or an individual, any work for or with the poor implies an entering into relationship.

There again the missionaries are following Christ. The evangeliser of the poor proclaims the Good News of salvation; and it is primarily Good News for the poor (Lk 4,13) because it takes concret shape in the changes brought into the lives of the poor: the lame walk, the blind see, etc. This making of a link between the Good News of salvation and the poor is a constant in the Word of God. It is even a criterion of authenticity regarding relationship with God, from the time of the Exodus onwards.

I'm not going to take you on a run through the Bible. I'd just like to share with you what I've learned through my own personal experience as a Vincentian who has been proclaiming the Gospel, and accompanying priests and laity in their commitments, notably through the St Vincent de Paul Conferences.

In my view the key-problem about mission is the relationship between charity and what is humanitarian. For neither the church nor the Vincentians have the monopoly on the poor. Besides, the situations in which the poor are struggling are matters of responsibility for the State and for society: they are social problems. Justice is at stake. Those who carry out humanitarian action and are involved in social struggle for the liberation of the poor are not for the most part Christians and at times they act with great competence and with remarkable generosity and effective means. In such new contexts, what is the meaning of evangelising the poor? What is the place of charity in missionary witness?

At the heart of mission, as at the heart of charity, we find relationship. Without relationship there is no mission, no charity. God is in himself relationship, and wants us to be beings in relationship. Relationship is the core of our spiritual experience, the axis of our undertakings and our commitments. This relationship is both personal and personalised. For Vincentians the poor person has always had a face; they take pity on the crowds of poor people abandoned like sheep without shepherds. And so they'll set about multiplying loaves.

(It would be good to use John 6 as a basis for carrying out an actualised Vincentian reading of the multiplication of the loaves and the discourse on the bread of life. This whole scenario poor, mission, material and spiritual needs....where there is a passing from daily bread to the bread come from heaven which is the person of Jesus. Let's not forget that it was with regard to a talk on the eucharist that St Vincent makes the affirmation: "Charity is infinitely inventive".) (12)

What characterises the special relationship with the poor according to the Vincentian spiritual experience is its rootedness and its personal dimension. And this relationship is "trinitarian": poor person, me, us. Poor person and myself: we're distinct and yet "one" in an enriching relationship. Paul says "*transformed*" (Eph. 1,4) in speaking of our relationship to

Father, Son and Spirit. Our relationship with the poor, an expression of our relationship with God, has a creative power. The Holy Spirit wells up into the relationship and, when it is true and authentic, confers on it personal characteristics. Beyond mere sympathy or empathy, relationship creates communion.

The special Vincentian characteristic is that this relationship is directed towards the person of Christ the evangelizer of the poor recognised and served in the person of poor people encountered concretely in day-to-day living along my route which is the itinerary of my life while also constituting the course of History.

Three gospel episodes -- which we don't have the time to meditate on -- reinforce my conviction:

1 Lk 4,13 already cited which indissolubly links the liberation of the poor to the Good News of salvation incarnated in the presence of Jesus consecrated by the Spirit of the Father.

2 Mt 25, a prodigious text! The last judgment of the Nations has as its central concern the poor and especially the littlest ones. No accusations about doctrine, morality, religious practice, prayer, virtues, etc. Everything is focussed on the transforming (or otherwise) relationship which the nations (and not merely Christians) have had with the poor, that is with those who are lacking the essentials to be fully able to stand up as men and women: food, clothing, water, health, freedom.

The astonishment of the good and the bad people doesn't come from their ignorance of the poor whom they've all seen, but from their ignorance of the relationship of Christ to the poor. Serving the poor is honouring Christ.

3 Lk 10: The Good Samaritan. A journey, a traveller who is attacked, beaten almost to death, left at the side of the road that always leads from a Jerusalem to a Jericho, from the Temple of the divine glory and the divine law of the 1st and 2nd commandments to the desert and the Dead Sea. Specialists in mission and charity come along: they see and then cross to the other side. A Samaritan comes along, that is an enemy, a marginalised, who doesn't go to the Temple, and accepts as word of God only the Pentateuch and the Book of Joshua, or in other words a truncated Torah....This man sees, stops, helps, gives aid, entrusts the wounded man to others (thus networking) and enables the man to be no longer prone but upright and lively. He's the one who practised the commandments. He was made into neighbour through his relationship with the man left half-dead.

I cherish these three texts because they are so expressive of the mission and charity. Thus:

Lk 4,13 is the key-text of the Congregation of the Mission following Christ the evangelizer of the poor.

Mt 25 is the key-text of the Ladies and the Daughters of Charity who, gathered in the name of the Most Holy Trinity, honour Our Lord by serving him in the person of the poor.

Lk 10 is a key-text of the St Vincent de Paul Conferences of Frederic Ozanam and his companions, for it expresses personalised relationships, the charity of drawing near.

These three texts give expression to the paschal mystery which begins to unfold through the activities of the mission. But they also give expression to Christ in his paschal mystery: he is the evangelizer of the poor, He is the one who comes to the aid of people left half-dead on the

roadways of our times. So, in order to follow Christ it's not merely a matter of imitating Him but of identifying with Him in his mission and his charity. Or, to speak like St Vincent, mission requires that our Lord should be involved in it, and we with Him....and, thinking about tomorrow's talk on the missionary Church, --- not by way of conclusion but with the aim of helping you to internalise what I have been so imperfectly trying to share with you, I will add this:

Karl Barth, the Protestant German theologian, points out that after reading the hymn to charity in 1 Corinthians 12,13, one doesn't know for definite what is charity and that perfect way which remains after faith and hope have disappeared. He gives this advice which I pass on to you: In the hymn, replace the word, *charity, love, by Christ...*And you will see the meaning of "following Christ", being his disciple.

You will see that what's important is not carrying out works of charity, but allowing charity to work upon you.

### **What Church to build?**

To your question I respond by a question which I ask and which you should ask yourself... "You tell me what way you announce the Gospel in your popular mission and I help you to discern the sort of Church you are building!"

But to help you in your work and to get you to share what I already sense, I add:

We are called to build a Church in "Diaspora", by reason of four major challenges (Cf. SIEV -- preceding session).

- Secularisation: or the emancipation of the social and cultural components from religious tutelage
- Migration and inter-marriage
- The power of the image (ikons? or idols?)
- "Organised" poverties.

Facing the extraordinary changes we are living through today:  
the Church is only one VOICE among others at the level of discourse;  
the Church is only one WAY among others at the level of engagement in the multiplicity of messages of salvation and the modalities of believing.

The ideal is : that its actions should correspond with its words,  
that its undertakings should speak and correspond to its discourse.

There is in fact neither decline nor re-awakening of religion but *destruction* of the religious phenomena and thus a tacit appeal for *restorations*.

Can the spiritual be disengaged from the temporal?  
Is religious experience without a link to social function?

*Diaspora* Cf. Old Testament and New Testament



We need a theology of the laity.

When road-signs are lacking along our route,  
when one is no longer seeking a direction as one looks at the compass,  
no more moving ahead is possible, no more orientation (there where the sun rises!), hence no horizon.

There's only immobility or errancy.

Social institutions and cultural models are to be considered as  
mediations,  
means which are necessary, but passing,  
transitory,  
momentary, suiting one given moment,  
one given situation.

They are therefore necessary and relative, provisional.

So they are not an iron-collar of an immobile society, nor pliable objects which can be manipulated.

They are the institutions,

They are the models, a security

belonging to the stages of an accepted itinerary

because the world changes,

because we change,

because the world changes us

and because in order to change the world, we must change ourselves.

It's the same with the Church (and the Churches).

It shows a way when it doesn't seek to fix the Gospel into institutions, models, structures.

In the First Century, the community of those who followed the *way*.

In the Second Century, the community of Christians (Acts 2) is called: *parokia*...and the Christians *parokoi* = strangers, in order to stress their fragile, threatened character; the Christian, like the believer since Abraham's day, is a traveller, a nomad.

Cf. The Letter to Diogenes.

Cf. NT, 1 Pi 1-5; Hebrews; Paul (Captivity Letters).

Translator: Stanislaus Brindley CM

1 Conference given at the International Vincentian Month organized by SIEV on the theme of "Popular Missions".

2 Cf Message of the Bishops of France to young Catholics on the occasion of the World Youth Days held in 1997 in France and in Paris with the Pope from 19 - 24 August.

(3) Cf S.V. IV, 586, 589, 604. See R. Chalumeau, Saint Vincent et ses missions en France au XVII<sup>ème</sup> siècle, in Bulletin de la Société d'Études du XVII<sup>ème</sup> siècle, 1958, 41, pp 317-327, J.-P.

Renouard Le zèle chez S. Vincent de Paul, Semaine Vincentienne, 20-30 octobre, Paris 1987, in BLF tiré à part pp 1-6.

(4) C.f. S.V. I, 295

(5) C.f. Lumen Gentium 1.

(6) Here Luke is giving us the definition of the liturgical homily: an actualising of the Word of God proclaimed in the assembly.

(7) Cf S.V. XIII pp. 197-206.

(8) The nearest English equivalent would be "Go to hell", you're like a devil trying to turn me from my work.

(9) This is the phrase focussed on for the World Youth Days.

(10) See the first regulation for the first Charité of December 1617; likewise the Constitutions of the DCs and the Common Rules of the CM.

(11) Cf. Paul VI, Evangelii nuntiandi; John Paul II, Redemptoris Missio.

(12) S.V. XI,146

(13) The tomb of Frederic Ozanam is located in the crypt of the Carmelite Church at the Institut Catholique of Paris, rue de Vaugirard, behind the fresco which depicts the parable of the Good Samaritan.