

Address to the international gathering of those responsible for the Vincentian Marian Youth Groups

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It is good for us to be here, my brothers and sisters, as we celebrate this first gathering of those responsible for the Vincentian Marian Youth Groups throughout the world.

Your Association has a wonderful origin: it sprang from a message that Catherine Labouré received from the Virgin Mary. The Church officially approved your groups 150 years ago. They spread quickly to many nations, and today your numbers are increasing very rapidly throughout the world. We estimate that more than 200,000 young people are members of Vincentian Marian Youth Groups. You, who are their leaders, have come together from almost fifty countries to represent these young men and women.

Today, I want to express to you my hopes for the future of the Vincentian Marian Youth Groups. As we look toward the third millennium, the future lies in your hands. If the Church is fully alive in the year 2000, 2010, 2020, it will be because you are fully alive. So, these are my hopes for you.

1. I hope that you will be more and more deeply rooted in the person of Jesus.

This seems so obvious, but there is nothing more important that, as an older brother, I can say to you. "Remember," St. Vincent de Paul once wrote, "that we live in Jesus Christ by the death of Jesus Christ and that we ought to die in Jesus Christ by the life of Jesus Christ and that our life ought to be hidden in Jesus Christ and full of Jesus Christ and that in order to die like Jesus Christ it is necessary to live like Jesus Christ."¹ The gospels ring with this conviction: Jesus is the absolute center. "I am the way, the truth, and the life," Jesus says. "No one comes to the Father except through me."² "I am the vine."³ "I am the gate."⁴ "I am the shepherd."⁵ "I am the light."⁶ "I am the true bread come down from heaven. The one who feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood will live forever."⁷

¹ SV I, 295.

² Jn 14:6.

³ Jn 15:6.

⁴ Jn 10:9.

⁵ Jn 10:11.

⁶ Jn 8:12.

⁷ Jn 6:51.

Let me simply recall to you today the wonderful prayer attributed to St. Patrick:

*Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me.
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.*

I recommend two principal means for focusing on the person of Jesus.

The first is daily prayer. Make Christ the center of that prayer, especially the crucified and risen Lord. Engage in a well-defined period of reflective prayer each day and let the Lord capture your mind and your heart. Speak to him in your own words. Tell him with great simplicity of your joys and your sorrows, your fears, your anxieties. Tell him that you love him and be deeply confident that he loves you. Trust that he walks with you. When you fall, be sure that he is there to pick you up and embrace you forgivingly. Hide nothing from the Lord. Know that you can always come to him with exuberant confidence, as St. Vincent de Paul once put it, trusting in his pardon and love.

The second means, and it is not completely distinct from the first, is to find, love, and serve Christ in the person of the poor. They are our lords and masters, St. Vincent de Paul tells us. Jesus continues to live on in them in a special way, particularly in the crucified peoples. It is so easy for the "world", and for us too, to become numb to their plight: the 5.7 million people of Haiti, who have been so poor for so long that their pain is no longer news; the 2.5 million Bosnian refugees who are victims of "ethnic cleansing"; the 1.5 million Somalians on the edge of death by starvation; the countless Rwandans, Zairians, and Cambodians who have been brutally slain. Our contemplation of the crucified Lord cannot remain merely a pious exercise; nor can it be simply meditation on a past event. The Lord lives on in His members. He is crucified in individual persons and in suffering peoples. The call is to see Him and to serve Him there. "When I was hungry you gave me to eat. When I was thirsty you gave me to drink. When I was naked you clothed me."⁸

2. *I hope that you are deeply rooted in the scriptures.*

The word of God never fails. It is effective, creative. It runs beyond mere pragmatic "calculation" and unfolds a deeper wisdom that lies hidden in the mystery of God's love. I encourage you to know the scriptures and, like Mary the mother of

⁸ Mt 25:35-36.

Jesus, to turn God's word over again and again in your hearts, treasuring it. The scriptures are water that gives us life, as Isaiah (55:10-11) puts it, when our hearts and minds are dry. They are a hammer for us, as Jeremiah (23:29) puts it, when we are complacent, too set to budge. They are food that is sweeter than honey, as the Psalmist (19:11) puts it, when we are hungering to know what God is asking for us. They are a two-edged sword, as the author of Hebrews (4:12) puts it, so that when we preach to others, it cuts into us too. In knowing the scriptures, we know Jesus himself. So, read the word of God daily. Let it be your rule of life.

You are a Marian Association. I encourage you therefore to learn from your mother. In the New Testament Mary is the model listener. She is the first to hear the good news. She is the ideal disciple, the example for all believers. Mary listens reflectively, in the infancy narratives, to:

Gabriel, who announces the good news of God's presence and tells her of the extraordinary child whom she is to bear;⁹

Elizabeth, who proclaims her blessed among women because she has believed that the word of the Lord would be fulfilled in her;¹⁰

Shepherds, who tell her and others the message which has been revealed to them about the child, the good news that a Savior is born!;¹¹

Simeon, who proclaims a canticle and an oracle: the first, a song of praise for the salvation that has come to all the nations; the second, a prophecy that ominously forebodes the scandal of the cross;¹²

Anna, who praises God in Mary's presence and keeps speaking to all those who are ready to hear;¹³

Jesus himself, who tells her about his relationship with his heavenly Father, which must take precedence over everything else.¹⁴

3. *I hope that you learn from the poor and are inventive in serving them.*

St. Vincent tells us this very directly: it is only the simple and humble who really grow in the Lord's life. Only they can learn the depths of God's wisdom. The saints knew this very well because they had made the gospel teachings their own.

⁹ Lk 1:26f.

¹⁰ Lk 1:39f.

¹¹ Lk 2:16f.

¹² Lk 2:25f.

¹³ Lk 2:36f.

¹⁴ Lk 2:41f.

That is why St. Vincent urged all his followers to grow in simplicity and humility. Learn especially from the poor. They can teach all of us about gratitude for small gifts, about patience in waiting, about hoping against hope, about loving those around us, about solidarity with others in the midst of suffering and oppression, about sharing the little that we have with our brothers and sisters.

It is only when we have learned from the poor that we can be inventive in serving them. It is they who will explain to us their deepest needs, so that we can bring to them gifts that will really be helpful. Your creativity and imaginativeness as young people will be nourished by what you can learn from them.

4. *I hope that you allow the Lord to set you free.*

Jesus acts with wonderful freedom in the gospels. He cures on the Sabbath, much to the chagrin of the pharisees. He moves readily from place to place in a mobile ministry. He speaks the truth without fear. He wants his followers too to enjoy this "glorious freedom of the children of God."¹⁵

A first sign of freedom is mobility, flexibility, availability in the service of the poor. I want to encourage you as young people today: be adventurous. Be willing to risk. Be truly missionary. Resist the temptation to allow yourselves to be tied down by the hunger for material things that is so characteristic of present-day society. Material things are good, surely. God created them. But they can also weigh us down. They can keep us fixed in a single place, always wanting to have more and more. They can wall us off from others. Now, especially when you are young, be sure to use the freedom that the gospel gives you. Be willing to explore the possibilities that Jesus offers you. Make wise vocational choices by which you can truly make a contribution to life. How can you best serve the Lord in freedom?

Another sign of freedom, and one that I have often seen in good people, is great honesty. Jesus liberates us to speak the truth. Not long ago I read the secret diary of Cardinal Mazarin, the prime minister of France in the mid-seventeenth century, when St. Vincent de Paul was organizing works among the poor and was training the clergy. In his diary Mazarin counts Vincent among his enemies. And why? because St. Vincent spoke the truth to the queen, whom Mazarin was trying to dominate. Vincent was fearless in that regard. He was prudent. He was gentle. He was charitable. But he knew how to speak the truth clearly. In that sense, he was truly free, as were so many saints.

Real freedom involves a love that a modern writer has called "reckless but disciplined." It is "reckless" because it knows no bounds. It cannot be tied up. It breaks the chains that attempt to hold it back. But it is at the same time "disciplined" because it knows that real freedom needs to be channeled toward a single goal. I

¹⁵ Rm 8:21.

encourage you, as young people, to dare great things and to work with discipline at achieving them.

5. *I hope that you minister to other young people.*

Although the elderly often have many gifts to offer to the young, it is clear that you who are young have special gifts for ministering to other young people. Today I urge you to make ministry to other young people one of your principal objectives. The young are the future of the Church. They are the servants of the poor of the 21st century. They are searching for ways to give their lives generously. One of the great challenges that lies before the Church is to offer the young a relevant, attractive, worthwhile way of giving their lives to God in the service of the poor. Your own Vincentian Marian Youth Groups are one of those ways _ call others to join you.

Let me suggest three concrete means by which you can gather other young people together:

a. Organize more Vincentian Marian Youth Groups - Create youth groups everywhere you go, especially in parishes and schools. These groups can offer a well-articulated program of formation to young people, a spirituality in the service of the poor. The parish is often the initial center for nourishing the faith of the young. If parishes fail in this task, the Church grows weak at its grassroots. Schools have a huge influence on the lives of the young. Many of their values in the future will be the values their school offers them. Provide young men and women, in both their parishes and schools, with the opportunity to be members of Vincentian Marian Youth Groups.

b. Seek Mission Volunteers - Many young people are eager to give a year or two or three or five of their lives in the service of the poor. Look for ways in which you can provide them with opportunities for doing so, along with good personal accompaniment. If young people are well-formed to engage in such experiences, they will enjoy the opportunity of a lifetime. Their lives will never be the same afterwards. These experiences can open the hearts of the young to a deep love for the poor and a practical ongoing commitment to serve them.

c. Promote Ministries for Young People - Today the Church emphasizes the wide variety of ministries that are possible within the Christian community. It is important to provide good formation to young people so that they might begin to engage in these ministries early in their lives. Many young people will be eager to be acolytes, lectors, ministers of the Eucharist, music ministers, catechists, liturgical artists, visitors of the sick, peer ministers.

6. *I hope that you will have a global perspective, that your world view will be more and more international.*

The world has changed dramatically since the time of St. Vincent. When an event took place in 17th century Europe, it might take a year before the news reached the other continents. In fact, people were still addressing letters to St. Vincent more than six months after he had died. News traveled very slowly! Today on television we watch global events as they happen. In the Gulf War, television cameras actually accompanied the troops as they entered Kuwait and Iraq. We know of earthquakes and natural disasters within minutes after they happen.

We can also get to places quickly. Even at the beginning of the last century it might take six months to go to China. Today I can arrive in Beijing on an 11-hour non-stop flight.

The Vincentian Family too is becoming more and more worldwide. Our members live in more than 120 countries. There are few nations in the world where we are not represented. Just in recent years we have moved into Tanzania, the Solomon Islands, Albania, the Altiplano of Bolivia, a new part of Mozambique, new places in China, Kharkiv in the Ukraine, and Siberia.

Today I want to encourage you young men and women to raise up your sights toward broad horizons. It is important to love your own country. But global solidarity is even more important. All of the recent popes have emphasized our universal brotherhood and sisterhood. They call us to create a civilization of love, to bridge the widening gap that exists between the rich nations and the poor nations.

Recently in Bolivia I met young lay Vincentian missionaries who gave 3, 4, 5 years of their lives in the service of the poor. Are there ways in which all of us can serve the global community? Are their steps that we can take to reach out to the poorest of the poor? My hope is that you young men and women will meet the challenge of the global community of the future.

7. *I hope that you engage in an ongoing, lifelong formation.*

As I grow older, I become more and more convinced that life is a never-ending journey. In fact, Jesus promises us eternal life, life without end. Of course, it has very different stages. In youth we possess drive, enthusiasm, spontaneity. In the middle years we have the experience, hard-earned skills, projects that we have developed over time, a network of relationships that we have built up in trust. Aging often brings with it the richness of wisdom, of a contemplative dimension to life, and sometimes of a new liberty that is no longer preoccupied with success or the applause of others.

But to live all of these stages well, we need formation. The sad error that so many often make is to think that formation ends with formal schooling. On the contrary, it is a lifelong project. To live vitally as a Christian in youth, in the middle years, in aging, and in dying, one must be continually nourished. One must be

surrounded by a teaching and learning community that supports us to meet the new challenges that each of life's stages brings.

I encourage you to drink deeply from the sources of ongoing formation. As the poor reveal to you their needs, seek to be as competent and as creative as possible in their service. Make a firm commitment to being continually formed in an integral way: spiritually, humanly, apostolically, within a believing community that lives and prays in the Spirit.

My young brothers and sisters, I express these hopes to you as the representatives of Vincentian Marian Youth Groups throughout the world. I pledge you my own deepest support too as the successor of St. Vincent.

Pope Paul VI said at the end of Vatican II that the strength and charm of youth is "the ability to rejoice with what is beginning, to give oneself unreservedly, to renew oneself, and to set out again for new conquests."¹⁶ Use these gifts well. Dream youth's dreams, but also work hard at making them come true. Pray with passion, but let the peace of the Lord penetrate you too. Reach out to other young people, and help them to see and know Christ, who is working in your lives. And I pray that the Lord, even later in the autumn and winter of life, will continually renew the joy of your youth.¹⁷

¹⁶ Closing Message of Vatican II, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 58 (1966) 18.

¹⁷ Cf. Ps 42:4.