

## **Closing Address General Assembly 1998**

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General Superior*

I have always loved a wonderful passage from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*:

*There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries. On such a full sea are we now afloat; and we must take the current when it serves, or lose our ventures* (Act 4, Scene 3).

As we end this Assembly, my brothers, I encourage you to seize the tide. Seize this time of grace. Seize the momentum that is building up in our Vincentian Family to move forward as a peaceful army, uniting our energies in concrete works of charity and justice in the service of the poor. "Grace has its moments," St. Vincent tells us (SV II, 453). Can we together seize this moment to grow as a family in a profound Vincentian spirituality and to formulate collaborative projects in which we stand with and work with those who are most abandoned, for their own integral human development?

Today I ask four questions about this General Assembly.

### **I. First, what have we learned from the members of our extended family, who joined us for a week during this Assembly? How have they evangelized us?**

Let me suggest some very simple, initial responses. You yourselves can add others, I am sure.

From AIC, we have learned the importance of advocacy for the poor, of calling out for justice and human rights, of making our Vincentian voice heard at important international organizations like the European Community and the United Nations.

From the Daughters of Charity, we have learned the perennial importance of service to the sick poor, a work of huge importance in today's world; in fact, it is one that never seems to diminish. We have learned too from the Daughters of Charity the fundamental choice that they have made to reach out to women and children, the poorest of the poor in almost all countries.

From the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, we have learned the importance of attacking illiteracy, of teaching children and adults how to read and write. We have learned too the importance of the personal home visit which characterizes the Society's approach to the poor.

From the Vincentian Marian Youth groups we have learned the importance of developing programs of good initial formation, a real catechesis that roots young people in Christ the Evangelizer and Servant of the Poor.

From MISEVI, we have learned of the courage and adventure that lies in the hearts of so many young people. On the last day of the presence of our guests here at the Assembly, Virginia Alfaro came to tell me that after spending seven years as a missionary in Honduras, she has now decided to go to a new mission in Bolivia, where she hopes to continue giving her life to God in the service of the poor.

From Ubaldina Morales, who came to us from Panama, I am sure that all of us who listened to her learned the deep faith of campesinos, who hear the word of God as it breaks into the lives of the poor and believe in it deeply as good news.

From the Association of the Miraculous Medal, we learned about simple devotion to the Virgin Mary, whose Magnificat sings of the liberation of the poor and envisions a day when the mighty are cast down and the lowly are lifted up. We also learned of the growing apostolic potential of his huge organization whose members in Spain last year made pastoral visits to more than 500,000 families.

## **II. What calls did we hear from the various branches of our family?**

The members of our family presented us with 20 recommendations. I will not repeat them all here, since everyone has copies. Let me mention four calls that I heard in these recommendations.

1. I heard a loud call for mutual help in formation. The members of our family want to deepen their spirituality. They want to understand St. Vincent better and his vision of Christ and of the world. They judge that this is one of our family's greatest needs and they recognize that we can help each other in satisfying that need.
2. I heard a call for coordination on local, regional, national, and international levels. Different words are used to describe the coordinating structure. Sometimes it is called a team, sometimes a committee, sometimes a secretariat. But there is a clear call to create coordinating instruments for channeling our common energies.
3. I heard a call for greater communication within the family, through sharing publications that already exist, through creating new ones perhaps, through the use of media like the Internet.
4. I heard a loud call, even a cry, for collaborative projects, for discerning together what are the greatest needs of the poor in various parts of the world, for formulating concrete projects to attack those needs, for working together as a family in missions *ad gentes*.

Those are some of the clearest calls that I heard. I am sure many of you heard others as well.

### **III. What is our response as an Assembly?**

As an Assembly, in our final document, we have expressed to the confreres throughout the world our vision of the challenges of the mission, we have stated our convictions, and we have made a number of commitments. It seems to me that the commitments we have made are a good initial response to the calls of the members of our extended family. Our commitments speak explicitly of the formation of our extended Vincentian Family. They speak of the need for coordination on local, regional, national, and international levels. They urge us to use modern media for fostering better communication within our family in the service of the poor, and they speak of concrete, collaborative projects in which we can channel our huge energies toward the most abandoned both within our provinces and in missions *ad gentes*.

May I suggest to you one other theme that does not appear very prominently in our commitments and that I judge to be most important for our future service of the poor as a family; namely, youth. I encourage you as you go forth from this Assembly to form

our Vincentian Marian Youth groups wherever you go. See this as one of the great challenges of the third millennium. The future servants of the poor are the young. They are the evangelizers of the third millennium. They are the people who will visit the poor in their homes, who will carry out practical, concrete projects for the integral human promotion of those who are destitute. It is they who will teach people to read and write. It is they who will attack the causes of poverty. If we can offer young people a deeply Christian, Vincentian formation our Vincentian Family will continue to grow as a powerful instrument in the service of the poor.

We have a precious gift to offer the young: a vision of Christ as the evangelizer and the servant of the poor. To the extent that we can offer that gift generously to them, our family will be fully alive in the third millennium.

### **IV. What is the next step to be taken?**

I ask you to go and spread the news of this Assembly, its enthusiasm, and its results. Go, tell the confreres confidently that with the members of our family we can be an enormous force in the service of the poor.

Concretely, I ask the following:

1. That as soon as possible (for example in October or November), all the Visitors hold workshops with all the confreres of their provinces in which you study the document of this Assembly. In those meetings, challenge the confreres to come up with concrete ways of implementing the commitments that we have made in the Assembly document. The video that Fr. Mika is preparing will be sent to you within a month. Use it as a means of communicating to the confreres the experience of this Assembly.

2. Having heard the confreres of the province, I ask that each Visitor discuss with his council how the recommendations of the Assembly might be implemented in your province.

3. In a meeting of the superiors of the province with the Visitor and the members of the provincial council, brainstorm about how the commitments might be concretized.

4. Ask each house to concretize in its local community plan, which must be eventually be approved by the Visitor and his council (Statute 69, 5°), how the house intends to concretize the commitments.

5. Make the implementation of these commitments an important agenda item at your next provincial gathering or provincial assembly.

This Assembly is now finished. I am very grateful for all your labors during a long, hot, tiring month. I hope that the days ahead bring you rest and refreshment. Then I urge you to go forth with renewed vigor, filled with the conviction that God is calling our family to deepen our commitment to follow Christ as the evangelizer and servant of the poor, to sink deeper roots into his person, to resonate with his passion for the truth, to listen humbly with him to the cries of the poor and the calls of the Church, and to formulate and carry out concrete, practical, collaborative projects that will really make a difference in the lives of the most abandoned.

Go forth, my brothers, with peace and joy. There is a tide in our Vincentian Family. Seize it as a moment of grace.