

Recent Homilies

Editor's Note

Periodically, VINCENTIANA will print homilies of the Superior General as he speaks to various groups of confreres and members of the Vincentian Family.

HOMILY FOR PRIEST-STUDENTS STUDYING IN ROME VISIT AT THE GENERAL CURIA

December 1, 2013

My brothers in Jesus and St. Vincent:

This first Sunday in Advent is a new day in a new month, and it starts a new liturgical year. This past year has been one of many new beginnings: a new Pope who captured the minds and hearts of people the world over; a 'Year of Faith,' calling us to recommit ourselves to Christ; a year to recall the 50th anniversary of the start of Vatican II; a year when our Visitors met mid-way between General Assemblies to review our goals; and a year when we initiated a new program to provide training to Vincentian Family leaders to increase their awareness and practice of our Vincentian charism.

As student priests studying and dealing with the rigors of academic work, you might view what I have just stated as interesting, but not of pressing concern to you as you attend lectures, write papers, and move forward with your degree programs. That is understandable, to a point. But our gathering today is a reminder of our concern and support for you in these crucial years of your education. For you all will be called to lead, serve, and "*put on the Lord Jesus Christ*" (Rom. 13:14), as Paul invites us to do in today's second reading.

That is why the topic of our conference today is crucial to your education: reflecting on our Constitutions, namely, "Apostolic Activities". It is where much of our lives are focused. The readings of this first Sunday of Advent help us to better see what the Constitutions tell us is the true goal of all our apostolic activity: "To make the Gospel really effective" (Const. Ch. 1, N. 11).

At first glance, this may not seem so. Jesus' words in today's Gospel have a tone of fear and foreboding. He speaks of what we might call 'doomsday scenarios' such as thieves breaking into a house and people from field and mill who vanish into thin air. But there is a deeper reality at work here. Jesus uses ordinary examples of home and work to alert us on how quickly life can change, and keep us from being lulled into a false sense of security. We "stay awake" (Mt. 24:42) by keeping our minds and hearts attuned to Christ, so we may recognize and

respond to his presence in our midst, especially in the poor. What sounds like a warning in this Gospel – “*You must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come*” is really an invitation. To welcome Jesus into our lives is a goal and constant hope of every Christian heart!

Our Constitutions frame this great goal to welcome Christ through the active apostolate in the ministry of evangelization. At our core, we Vincentians are called to announce the Good News of Jesus Christ to the poor. This reality stretches from our community seal – “*Evangelizare Pauperibus Misit Me*” to our virtue of “zeal for souls” which our Constitutions call us to achieve every day. The Constitutions are not only words on paper, but a concrete way to interiorize our call to Christian discipleship and living out our Vincentian vows.

Advent is a short liturgical season, but a wonderful time to ponder the past year and forge our future faith journey. Isaiah gives us beautiful images in today’s first reading: the mountain of the Lord; a place of peace, harmony, and unity among peoples and nations. It shows us an ideal world: “*They shall beat their swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks; one nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor train for war again*” (Is. 2:4). This scriptural image is such a powerful one that it is inscribed at the entrance of the United Nations building!

But we know the reality of life so often intrudes on the ideal world we hope for: global conflicts, civil wars, terrorism, poverty, exploitation, and constant natural disasters. How then, are we to heed the last line of Isaiah: “Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord”? (Is. 2:5). We can use Advent to delve into God’s Word and our Constitutions, notably the section on ‘Apostolic Activity’. As a student priest, you may find it difficult to reflect on ‘apostolic activity’ given your present duties.

However, I also point out to you a part of this section of the Constitutions that apply to all of us, no matter our age or apostolate. Under “characteristics” of the “work of evangelization”, it states that we must all “*strive to live in a state of continuous conversion, both on the part of the individual member and of the whole Congregation*” (Const. Ch. 1, N. 12-6). Use this Advent as a time to pray more intensely with the Scriptures, and to meditate on our Constitutions.

Next year it will be thirty years since our Constitutions were promulgated. Take time to ponder its words and ideals. Ask the Lord Jesus and our Holy Founder to guide and inspire you to discover new meaning in its rich text for you to live by. I pray that in that in reading and reflecting on our Constitutions you may grow in fidelity to “the kingdom, that is to say... a new manner of being, of living in community which the Gospel inaugurates” (Const. Ch. 1, N. 11, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* N. 23).

HOMILY TO CLOSE NEW VISITORS MEETING IN ROME**January 14, 2014*****“Authority and obedience in service of our Mission”***

My dear brothers in St. Vincent:

We are at the end of our time together, and I hope it has been an experience for you of “information for formation”. Over these last nine days, you have had to absorb much pertaining to your ministry of leadership as Visitor. Perhaps it has seemed overwhelming. But what has been given you in these days is not presentation and information for its own sake. As brothers in the Lord Jesus, who follow St. Vincent, we have a charism forming us in love of God and service of the poor. For these two great gifts – love of God in discipleship with Jesus, and a Congregation with an apostolic and communal life to serve the poor, – for these, we should be ever grateful.

The two key words framing our meeting, – authority and obedience – are not popular ones in today’s world. ‘Authority’ is a word often seen as suspect, both in ecclesial and civic circles. It can conjure up images of heavy-handedness, or of power-hungry leaders unwilling to assist those they serve. Similarly, ‘obedience’ can seem an outmoded idea, one that robs people of the free exercise of their rights. Seen in this way, the misuse of authority and obedience, either in a civil or ecclesial context, could be akin to the “unclean spirit” affecting the man in today’s gospel.

But both readings today help us to grasp how prayer, discernment, and servant leadership create a mature awareness and appreciation of authority and obedience. They offer a stark contrast to a solely human viewpoint. In the first reading from Samuel, we find a heart-rending story of supplication in Hannah, a woman of faith, clearly in distress, who wants a son. She prays desperately to God, promising to dedicate him in service to the Lord. But as Hannah prays fervently, the temple priest Eli, the authority figure, initially dismisses Hannah as a drunken fool. He is overbearing and judgmental, and who does not encourage much confidence in authority.

But Hannah, united deeply in prayer to the Lord, still respects Eli’s authority, pleading with simplicity and humility. Her purity of intention leads Eli to recant his mistaken judgment, and offer a prayer and a blessing on her behalf. This is a powerful lesson on the difference of authority driven by human egotism and obedience motivated by spiritual unity with God.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus inspires obedience, as he offers “a new teaching with authority” (Mk. 1:27). But it is not only what Jesus does, but how he does it that makes this passage a lesson on Christian authority and obedience. Jesus first commanded respect because of how he

taught in the synagogue. Why? Outwardly, Jesus was not an educated Jew, certainly not a learned scribe. Yet, his words resonated with the people. How does Jesus use his authority when the man with the unclean cries for help? Jesus calls for quiet, prays, and removes the unclean spirit. He uses his authority simply, sparingly, and with the Father for the good of the suffering man.

There is a lesson here for all of us, including me. How? Well, as Visitors, you have to do the difficult and time consuming work of planning for your province, administration, visitations, assignments, and other tasks. But you will each have to deal with your share of 'unclean spirits' which often arrive in the guise of thorny problems that take time and sap energy. How will you do so: like the temple priest Eli, with predisposed ideas, or like Jesus, with an open and loving heart committed to service? Will your time as Visitor be marked with 'my ideas and my way' or "a new teaching with authority"? Only you can decide this course of action.

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the promulgation of our Constitutions. I am using the occasion to urge confreres to read, study, and pray with this vital text, both personally and in common. As you know, our Constitutions offer not just a framework, but an enduring way to live and serve the Lord Jesus as brothers in St. Vincent. We are told in the section on vows that "*to participate in this mystery of the obedient Christ requires all of us, as community, to seek the will of the Father. We do this through mutual sharing of experience, open and responsible dialogue, in which differences of age and outlook interact, so that common directions may surface and develop, and lead to making decisions*" (C. Pt 2, Ch. III, N. 37).

Like Jesus and Vincent, your goal as Visitor must be to "seek the will of the Father" in all you do. And it is by a spirit of prayerfulness and recollection that you will be able to do so. Once again, our Constitutions are of help, as we are told: "*Sanctified in Christ and sent out into the world, we too should try to seek out in prayer the signs of God's will, and imitate the responsiveness of Christ, discerning everything according to his mind*" (C. Pt. 2, Ch. IV, N. 40-2). So, as you return home, perhaps you can celebrate this 30th anniversary of our Constitutions by reflecting on them in your own prayer, and urging confreres of your provinces to do the same.

As we come to this table to partake in the Lord's Supper today, let us be strengthened by Jesus' love for us, a love that motivated and sustained our Holy Founder Vincent. In hearing God's Word and celebrating this Eucharist, we truly find the nature of our authority: deep trust and obedience to the will of the Father lived so faithfully by his Son, our brother Jesus Christ.

**HOMILY FOR CLOSING MASS
AT VINCENTIAN FAMILY MEETING IN PARIS**

January 19, 2014

My dear brothers and sisters in Jesus and St. Vincent,

Let me begin with a quote from today's Scripture to sum up my feelings as we end our time together: *"I am made glorious in the sight of the Lord; my God is now my strength!"* (Isa. 49:5). Today, we celebrate the Eucharist as members of the Body of Christ and the Vincentian Family. "So we, though many, are one body in Christ" (Rom. 12:5). Our oneness with the Lord, so near and dear to St. Vincent, enables us to continue his charism of love of God and service to the poor. It is glorious sharing this time with you, and this experience gives me the strength to go on!

In coming together, we find strength and unity so essential and needed in our Church and our world today. The constant specter of war, civil and international; the economic and spiritual poverty and its effects on people, especially the poor; the vast numbers of refugees; and the terrible natural disasters the world over; these forces tear at the psyche of humanity, despoil human dignity, and fray the bond of community we share as members of the human family.

That is why it is good to join together as a Vincentian Family to work and worship. We "return to our roots" and drink from the deep spiritual well of our Vincentian heritage; namely to find the poor in Christ and Christ in the poor. Today's readings help us to focus on that goal by stressing two crucial virtues in the Scriptures: the value of servant-hood and Christian witness.

We know that both Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac served the poor with fidelity throughout their lives. But what kept them faithful to this task? Isaiah's first reading gives us a key insight: they found strength, conviction, and endurance not in earthly treasures, but in being attentive to their relationship with God. In other words, Vincent and Louise found in Jesus what St. Paul realized when he was imprisoned: *"I have strength for everything through Him who empowers me"* (Phil. 4:13). The Lord tells Isaiah that servant-hood, not self-importance, is the pathway to God. Once we embrace this way of following Jesus, he opens our minds and hearts to a new reality. In giving of ourselves, we receive more than we could ever have imagined.

Thus, the Lord tells Isaiah that whoever willingly embraces the role of God's servant is transformed as a "light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth" (Is. 49:6). Today, we see the "lights" Vincent and Louise lit burning brightly and steadily in the works of mercy, evangelization and service to the poor by the Vincen-

tian Family. It is our responsibility to fan those flames of hope, so they do not turn into embers of a past fire no longer giving heat or warmth.

The Gospel shows us what a true servant does: bear witness to the power and presence of God. And we have none other than John the Baptist, a witness “par excellence”, whose entire life and death was a ministry of witness preparing the way for Jesus. In today’s Gospel, John sees Jesus coming toward him and makes a statement now firmly implanted in our liturgy: “*Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*” (Jn. 1:29). It is not just the beauty of his words that is captivating. John shows us what it truly means to be a servant witness: “*A man is coming after me who ranks ahead of me because he existed before me*” (Jn. 1:30). At least twice in this brief passage, John tells us “I did not know him” (Jn. 1:31-33). Most of John’s life was spent announcing a Messiah he never met. From a human point of view, this is quite a sacrifice!

But John is a stellar example of a servant who witnesses: “*Now I have seen and testified that he is the Son of God*” (Jn. 1:34). And what is the secret to his intense and enduring witness? It can be found in a simple thought of his in a later chapter of this Gospel: “*He must increase and I must decrease*” (Jn. 3:30). In those few words, we find a summation of John’s ministry as a servant witness, and what it means to follow Jesus Christ. Those few words were the paradigm for the spirituality of Vincent and Louise, who spoke, wrote, and showed that Jesus was central to their lives. They witnessed to this reality in lives of Gospel service to Christ in the poor.

As we go our separate ways, prophets such as Isaiah or John the Baptist can seem distant from our daily realities of life. Yet on this Sunday, so early in the New Year, what Isaiah and John stand for; namely, servant-hood in God’s way and witnessing to Christ, should rekindle our commitment to the charism we share as members of the Vincentian Family. Vincent told his first followers: “*It is not enough for me to love God if my neighbor does not love him. I must love my neighbor as the image of God and the object of his love...*” (CED, Vol. XII, Conf. 207).

The Word of God we have heard, and the bread of life and cup of salvation we will share are what impelled and sustained our Holy Founders. Let us give ourselves to the Lord Jesus, so that we may, in the words of St. Vincent “*seek the glory of God... and the reign of Jesus Christ*” (CED, Vol. XII, Conf. 198).