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## Underlying Themes of General Assembly 2016: Multiculturalism, Solidarity, and Collaboration

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### 1. Introduction

“Let us allow ourselves to be renewed by the missionary vitality of our Vincentian vocation” (The theme of the General Assembly 2016, announced in a March 25, 2014 ‘Letter to the Visitors’ from the Preparatory Commission).

The underlying themes of GA 2016 are not easy ones to explore. They speak to an important question for us as Missioners in today’s world: how do we establish and inculcate a universal (international) perspective as Vincentians while we are engaged in particular (provincial) realities? Perhaps we can start by mentioning an expression which is popular in English-speaking countries: **“Think globally, act locally.”** It is often used to promote social justice and the environment. And it is relevant for this article which explores how we may better develop a balanced view of the Congregation with both a ‘provincial perspective’ and ‘international perspective’ at the same time.

Life experience is often the best teacher. The authors of this article would like to begin, not from abstract principles, but from situations that they have encountered in their own lives. Few of us would question the “universality” of the Church or of the Congregation on an intellectual or academic level. But if this issue were that simple, we would not be writing about it today.

### Testimony from Fr. G. Gregory Gay, C.M.:

Among the important issues for our next General Assembly, I believe there are three crucial ones: ***multiculturalism, solidarity, and collaboration***, all of which have been wonderfully woven in my life in community and my ministry. They have been both challenging and have enriched my vocation as a Vincentian. It began when I was assigned to Republic of Panama, the mission of my province where I served for fifteen years.

I still vividly recall so many fine experiences in Panama. As a new missionary, I traded the use of a car for horseback, traveling from village to village for three years. It was a great experience of entering into solidarity with those I served. Later, I worked in seminary formation, accompanying our men in Panama as they studied philosophy and theology. Then I was named director of the internal seminary, one of

my most enriching experiences of multiculturalism. We had seminarians from Panama as well as countries in the Province of Central America.

In the fifteen years I served in Panama, I interacted with different cultures, learned a new language, and adjusted to living in unfamiliar environments all served to enrich me. It also broadened my worldview beyond the perspective of a United States citizen. I learned to see the world from a different reality, namely from the place of the poor. I learned to listen with compassion to those who felt oppressed by policies of the USA, such as the December 1989 invasion of Panama. As happens with political and military upheaval, the poor suffer most.

After years of missionary work in Panama, I was asked to serve as Visitor for the Province of Central America. This province has a rich cultural background of confreres who are Latinos and indigenous backgrounds from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. Being the Visitor was challenging, as I was the only North American, but I learned methods to create dialogue with the confreres, patiently trying to come to solutions together for the poor we served.

After being Visitor in the Province of Central America, I was elected Superior General. In my ministry as the Superior General, I have made it a key priority to animate the Congregation of the Mission and Vincentian Family. I have been visiting the provinces of the Congregation and Daughters of Charity, and places in difficult parts of the world to offer support to the priests, brothers, sisters, and members of the Vincentian Family.

In my time as Superior General, many provinces and branches of the Vincentian Family have experienced multiculturalism and its positive effects, creating solidarity and community among these groups. Yet, there have also been negative experiences. Despite such tensions, I have witnessed much generosity on the part of a number of provinces in sharing their confreres and economic resources with others. Yet, there is a constant call we must heed to look beyond our own situations and immediate needs and to engage on international and interprovincial levels.

### **Testimony from Fr. Joseph V. Agostino, C.M.:**

My example begins in 2009, when my Visitor asked me to move from parish ministry (where I had the privilege to be in direct service with the poor for almost all of my priesthood) to work for the province in designing a provincial planning process.

It was a change I never sought, never asked for, never dreamed of. I asked him: where did my name come from for the job? I knew all the reasons why I didn't want to leave St. John the Baptist Parish in Brooklyn, NY at that point in my life, but this was a request I never antici-

pated. And as I look at what has gone on in my life over the last 4 years, some things have become clear to me about my world view and about God's intervention in my life.

- I came to realize on a different level that I took myself-identity more from what I did and not from who I am as a member of the Congregation;
- I was happy in my ministry – I saw myself as a pastor and a parish priest – actually for the rest of my life. I certainly never planned to change that. And the change was not easy.

Someone once said to me: I like change, as long as it doesn't affect me personally! Few of us say "I like change" when it comes to altering our own personal realities and comfort zones! I came to the realization that what I had valued – maybe even based my life on – may no longer be of use for me. I realized that I had been focused on the small "m-" of my ministry (in the parish reality) and not the capital "M-" of what "Mission" should mean to my life (as a member of the Congregation).

The call to universality which will be explored by this coming General Assembly becomes more specified as we study three ways in which it is manifested in our community life: multiculturalism, solidarity, and collaboration.

## 2. Multiculturalism

Accepting the call universality necessarily entail a values shift. And thus we run into the struggle we all have to deal with when we speak of universality.

We may receive great comfort in knowing that we do not stand alone in this. And we also know that Vincent de Paul walked this same road before us.

When he founded the Congregation, its purpose was simple: to preach the Gospel to the abandoned poor in the countryside of France. But we see how soon that purpose changed, even in his own lifetime. In the course of 21 years (from 1625 to 1646), Vincent saw his Little Company's Mission expand into retreats for ordinands, seminary formation, and the beginning of the foreign missions. What a change from the single-minded focus with which we were founded. And though Vincent certainly learned to rely on Divine Providence, we can have no doubt that he struggled with the personal sacrifices that these expansions caused him to make. One such example can be seen in two letters which he wrote to Charles Ozenne, a confrere working in the newly established mission in Poland:

[On newly-opened mission in Poland] *"Yes indeed, Monsieur, this consolation has reached the very depths of my heart. It also gives*

*me good reason to thank God for the consolation He grants the Company in blessing its works in this way, and to ask Him to bless it and your leadership more and more” (Volume: 5 Letter: 1807 Description: To Charles Ozenne, 27 November, 1654 Page: 234).*

*“It is He who has called you to Poland, has shown you such a bountiful harvest, and wants you to begin work on it, relying on a special trust in His grace and not on your own strength, since you have so little” (Volume: 5 Letter: 1722 Description: To Charles Ozenne, 27 March, 1654 Page: 114).*

We really can't do values in the abstract; somehow they need to have a practical manifestation in our lives for us to recognize their truth as individuals, as ministers in the Catholic Church, or as members of the Congregation. What follows are some concrete examples of what these “value shifts” may look like, and some struggles connected to them.

a) *On the human level...*

We deal with people who are different than us, be it because of the language they speak, the food they eat, or the color of their skin. And we have to be honest in looking into our hearts – there are many different levels on which we both do and don't accept others at the same time. When provinces or various apostolates within them are multicultural, it is not always easy to forge a sense of community within the mix... but we are challenged to make a conscious decision to work at it.

In the midst of this dynamic, we also have to deal with the personal struggle of learning how to be one with, though never the same as, those who are from different cultural backgrounds. Multicultural tensions can not only affect a particular apostolate, but a whole province or region of the Congregation. We are all too painfully aware of stories where ethnic / tribal / racial tensions (often times denied) may impact a community's ability to make personnel assignments and to minister effectively to the people we are called to serve. The call to move from regional concerns to universal considerations exists right in our own backyards. How we deal with this reality in our own lives will influence how successfully we work with it on the provincial and international level.

b) *On the Ministerial / Apostolic (Catholic) Level*

The issues surrounding parish mergers in the Church in Europe and North America are clear indications that we do not see beyond our own circles and comfort zones. Anyone who has had to deal with a parish merger is all too familiar with the resistances he faces. One sentiment heard often is that this particular church building is **mine** and I can't

possibly go to Mass or celebrate significant life moments anywhere else. On the other end of the spectrum, we hear how **those people in that parish** are not the same as us – why then do we have to now deal with them?

There is one major lesson we can learn here: we have a lot of work to do to help the People of God see that they are a vital part of a reality much larger than themselves and that the Body of Christ as well as the mission of the Church is ultimately not territorial but universal.

And we ourselves have just as much work to do to learn how to keep our eyes on the larger picture, namely the work of the Church (with a capital “C”) and the mission of the Kingdom as we deal with these types of specific dynamics. Creativity is born as we find ways to help both ourselves and others experience this larger reality.

### *c) On the Congregational Level*

So many confreres, while engaged in their own apostolates, show only passing interest in what their “province” is about (as long as it doesn’t touch their reality), let alone the international Congregation. And in spite of all the invitations to think otherwise (such as solidarity, the international missions, the Vincentian Family) we are still searching for more effective ways to broaden confreres’ horizons.

And while most confreres would agree with the theory behind these global initiatives, in practice it can be quite a different reality! Inter-provincial collaboration and / or reconfiguration processes parallel quite closely the dynamics of parish mergers.

Two practical examples might help illustrate this point:

- Negative example: sometimes we are open to dialogue or collaboration, when we are on the receiving end of it; that is, when a province is in need and looking for a benefit. Of course we can’t deny the importance of the need, but at the same time it can’t be the only reason that we seek to be universal. It might just be a starting point, but if it becomes a normative way of acting, it can truncate relationships, dialogue, and all possibility of future collaboration on any level.
- Positive example: provinces and individuals who demonstrate their sense of being part of a world-wide congregation by being available on many levels for collaboration (personnel, financial, etc.). They exhibit a sense of gratefulness by their generosity. They’re available to participate in Congregational and Vincentian Family efforts. They get others on board, because they live that sense of Mission. It is not a question of who we are as missionaries, but of what more can we do to be effective missionaries.

### 3. Solidarity

On July 18, 2014, in a letter to the Vincentian Family, Greg Gay wrote: "...that Vincent said with strength and conviction, 'It is true then, that I am sent not only to love God, but to make him loved. It is not enough for me to love God if my neighbor doesn't love him' (SV XII, Conf. May 30, 1659). Our vocation as Vincentians is to inflame the hearts of others: to do what the Son of God himself did."

Economic Solidarity is not a new concept in the Congregation. In our rule on poverty, Vincent de Paul wrote: "Members of the Congregation, individually and collectively, should understand that, following the example of the first Christians, all our belongings are common property..." (CR, 3). The Constitutions specify this further: "The Congregation of the Mission possesses temporal goods for pastoral and community needs... it administers these goods, however, as the patrimony of the poor, with solicitude, but with no attempt to grow rich" (C. 148.1). They go on to say: "Provinces and houses should share their temporal goods with each other so that those who have more help those in need" (C. 152.1.). Such assistance is a demand of charity and justice. It is not simply an act of generosity. And as such it even challenges the most generous among us to give beyond our present levels of giving.

We are an international Congregation almost since the time of our foundation. But we will not become a global community until we have embraced solidarity both as individual confreres and as provincial entities. The realization of our true missionary vocation will come about as we grow in the lived experience of belonging not to a specific ministry nor to a particular province, but to a Congregation which both encompasses and supersedes these realities. No matter where we are assigned, we are confreres called to the service of the Mission as friends who love one another deeply (cf. C. 25.1.). And as dear friends, we care for each other's needs.

Our Congregation faces many questions as we attempt to live in solidarity with one another. Provinces that are experiencing growth in personnel often are lacking in fiscal resources. How do they best provide for their economic stability while responding to the needs of those served by the Congregation – within or outside of their provincial territories? Provinces with significant resources are often facing declining personnel, whose physical and medical needs make a significant demand on their resources. How much is enough to care for our aged missionaries as we also continue to respond to the needs of persons living in poverty? Some areas that were once dependent upon outside resources are now not only self-sufficient, but in a position to assist once wealthier regions of the Congregation. How do we restructure our distribution of resources, both fiscal and personnel, so that everyone benefits?

We have spoken of these tensions for some time now, not only in meetings of Visitors but also in letters and articles that have been published for the Congregation. And some efforts have been made to respond to this expressed need, especially in the creation of patrimony funds. The recent decision by the Visitors (New York, July 2013) to take up an annual collection throughout the Congregation for this purpose is the latest example of a strategy that has been embraced. In his August 4, 2014 appeal for this collection, the Superior General reminded us: “By contributing and encouraging others to do so, you will help the Congregation of the Mission take root and grow so that many will be served! We will also be doing what St. Vincent did: establish ongoing financial support and stability, so our mission to be with and for the poor will continue.”

But much more than an annual appeal is needed. Hopefully the General Assembly of 2016 will address this question in earnest, and work together to create both the environment and the structures through which we can more fully experience our solidarity with one another. As Vincent said, we are never too poor to give, nor too rich to receive.

#### **4. Collaboration**

“In order that he might better respond to a wide variety of needs, St. Vincent brought together as many people as he could, rich and poor, humble and powerful, and used every means to inspire in them a sensitivity to the poor, who are the privileged image of Christ. He moved them to help the poor, directly and indirectly. They made this voluntary and generous dedication their own” (Constitutions, *Introduction*, p. 19).

Vincent challenged every group he founded, as well as all of his collaborators, to move from their comfort zones to where people were the most abandoned. He was very clear on this: our spiritual strength comes not from the choir but from the streets where we rub shoulders with those living in poverty, our Lords and Masters, as well as with our collaborators. Working together, even as messy as it may become at times, is a source of great energy, enthusiasm, and a release of the many gifts and talents that all of us bring to our ministries.

As members of the Vincentian Family, our understanding of collaboration lies in that particular charism given us by Vincent and our Founders: the call to serve those living in poverty coupled with the profound recognition that none of us can fully respond to it by working alone or in isolation. Every branch of our Family brings a unique perspective and contribution to this charism, which illustrates the unifying power of the Holy Spirit among us, as well as the wisdom of the legacy that Vincent left behind.

Today, more than ever, such Spirit-led, Vincentian service demands that we move from the comfort of our surroundings to those peripheries where the presence of Christ is most absent. Unfortunately, we can speak of both confreres and institutions who pay only lip service to the radical call of our charism and who are thus very hesitant to live on the edge. Pope Francis has reminded the Church – and especially us as a Vincentian Family – that our proper place is on the peripheries where Jesus and Vincent have already called us to be!

Collaboration calls forth the gifts of all those involved in common efforts, while respecting the freedom and autonomy of each one individually. The desire to work together, to share resources, and to allow projects to take shape through joint planning processes (as opposed to pre-conceived agendas) are attitudes fundamental to any successful initiative. Such attitudes often require a personal conversion, informed by the spirit of our charism. Often times these common initiatives are more easily realized on the local level than the regional or international one. Be that as it may, we acknowledge that the more collaborative we become, the truer we are to the spirit and legacy that Vincent left us.

St. Vincent reminds us: “The poor suffer less from a lack of generosity than from a lack of organization”. As we continue to learn how to combine our efforts, not only with our collaborators but also with those whom we serve, we will be more effective in the works of evangelization, systemic change, and social services. The General Assembly of 1998 as well as subsequent meetings of the international leaders of the Vincentian Family called for the creation of structures which would help facilitate this collaboration. Since that time:

- inter-branch commissions have been formed to guide the efforts of the Vincentian Family around areas of concern for our ministries;
- gatherings of the international leaders of the Vincentian Family are scheduled on a regular basis to continue to forge the bonds of unity among us; and
- a program has been developed to enhance the skills of the members of the Vincentian Family for the work of collaboration.

The Vincentian Family Collaborative Action Program (VFCAP) seeks to empower the members of the Vincentian Family to work together to help both individuals and communities emerge from poverty. It seeks to nurture the participant’s Vincentian spirituality, management skills and understanding, and also to provide for a tangible experience in collaboration. There are two dominant goals of VFCAP: (1) to appreciate the worldwide Vincentian Family’s untapped potential in the struggle to eradicate poverty; and (2) to appreciate that collaboration and systemic change are ongoing processes of transformation. Under the direction of the Vincentian Family Collaboration Commission, two

pilot programs had been offered in Paris; six regional programs have been requested by national Vincentian Family groups within the year since it has been offered to the Family.

There are many fine examples of collaboration in the Congregation which assist provinces in need of funds or personnel. Collaboration also exists among the various branches of the Vincentian Family, but it has been challenging. Despite our common charism to follow Jesus in evangelizing and serving the poor in the spirit of Saints Vincent and Louise, there is often a lack of coordination. Some branches remain separate; perhaps thinking it will preserve their uniqueness. A fear is that this can lead to isolation from other Vincentian Family members, negating the great potential we have when we work together. When collaboration occurs among the Vincentian Family, there is a spirit of enthusiasm, zeal, and desire to spread our charism.

As Benjamin Romo reminded us in 2009: “Today we are no longer an isolated Congregation, but rather a united family which, as such, has no other goal than making itself present among the poor to discover together with them God’s love, seeking roads of justice and love which will generate life” [*To Collaborate with the other members of the Vincentian Family*,” Final Document, N. 1].

## 5. Reflection

One article is not going to make us shift from provincial to universal perspectives. But the first step we can take is the recognition of how this issue is manifest in our lives. The Five Characteristic Virtues may assist us in this exploration and may help us see and appreciate realities beyond our immediate experiences.

- **Simplicity: the ability to accept that only together can we see the whole picture... I only have a small piece of the pie.**

Simply stated, this is the conviction that we need each other if we are to achieve the Mission that has been entrusted to us. This larger vision may be revealed only when each of us is willing to deal directly and clearly with each other, not holding our real thoughts or motives close to our chest, but expressing them openly and honestly so that a new understanding may come to light.

St. Vincent wrote: “*Simplicity converts everyone. It’s quite certain that, to convince and win over the human spirit, we have to act simply*”.

- **Humility: the recognition that I have biases – cultural, theological, and philosophical – through which I think and react to things in ways that are different from others.**

We have to maintain the tension which comes from recognizing that we all are different and that these differences are important and cannot be trivialized. Celebrating our differences and choosing to put them at

the service of the Mission can and will be constructive and beneficial toward our living as ONE, universal, Congregation.

St. Vincent wrote: *"The bane of Communities, especially small ones, is usually rivalry; the remedy is humility... We see that this rivalry occurred in the first Company in the Church, that of the Apostles; but we also know that Our Lord checked it..."* (Volume: 5 Letter: 2037 Description: To Louis Dupont, 26 March, 1656 Page: 528-530).

- **Meekness: I need to learn how to HEAR the perspectives that others are bringing to the table, especially when they are different than my own and acknowledge the value in them, even if I ultimately disagree.**

Mutuality, an essential component of universality, does not come about through perfect agreement on everything. But it does develop as I grow in my understanding of the needs, feelings, culture, i.e. totality, of the other.

St. Vincent wrote: *"We must be firm but not rough in our guidance and avoid an insipid kind of meekness, which is ineffective. We will learn from Our Lord how our meekness should always be accompanied by humility and grace so as to attract hearts to Him and not cause anyone to turn away from Him"* (Volume: 4 Letter: 1623 Description: To a Seminary Director Page: 571).

- **Mortification: a willingness to embrace the change in perspective (and its accompanying pain) that comes from accepting the fact that I stand in the midst of a world that is very different than me.**

I come to greatly respect the understanding that others have of our universal Mission as a Congregation without negating the value that I also bring to the dialogue. This virtue calls us to move beyond our comfort zones and into areas where we may experience ourselves as vulnerable before each other. But it is only here that we can experience the unity which the Spirit forges in the midst of diversity.

St. Vincent wrote: *"Mortification is also necessary because we have to be very firm with ourselves in order to renounce freely what we give to God, and it's by this virtue that we overcome ourselves"* (Volume: 12 Letter: 199 Description: Conformity to the Will of God, 7 March, 1659 Page: 137).

- **Zeal: the active desire to expand my horizons by shifting my vantage point (to a "balcony view") in which I seek to place my local or provincial reality in the context of the whole, the Mission of the Congregation.**

The first letter of John reminds us that "there is no fear in love" (1Jn 4:18). But in the human dynamic, we are all too aware of our

fears: the fear of the unknown (person or place), the fear of letting go of our control of a situation, the fear of leaving the familiar to live in uncertainty. These are but some of the personal peripheries which we need to move beyond in order to live the Vincentian Mission. Beyond our personal and communal boundaries is where the Gospel needs to be proclaimed today.

Thus, my personal ministry, my province, and my Visitor's conference all help me move toward this larger, universal call that Vincent left all of us as a lasting legacy. As human beings, we hunger for that which is larger than ourselves. "Where there is no vision the people, the confreres, the province, the Congregation perishes." Our challenge is to tap into this need in ourselves and our confreres so that all of us reap the benefit of working together for the sake of the Mission.

St. Vincent wrote: "*Zeal consists in a pure desire to become pleasing to God and helpful to our neighbor; zeal to spread the kingdom of God and zeal to procure the salvation of our neighbor. Is there anything in the world more perfect?*" (Common Rules, Chap. II, Art. 14).

## 6. Conclusion

The 2010 General Assembly calls us "*to cultivate a vital and concrete sense of belonging to the Congregation that goes beyond the sense of belonging to a local and provincial community*" (GA 2010 Lines of Action, 2.2). This Line of Action moves us from existing in an either – or context to living in the creative balance of a both – and situation.

All of us came to the community through provincial realities that have often mirrored the cultures in which we were born and raised. At the same time, we knew that we entered an international Congregation, following in the footsteps of St. Vincent de Paul. We are challenged to befriend both. And, in the spirit of Vincent, we are called to trust in a Divine Providence which never ceases to invite us to new relationships with the poor in a constantly changing world.

As we live and work in the context of our particular ministries, we do so as members of an international Congregation. The more I experience the link between MY work and OUR mission, the better I can embrace the universality of the missionary vocation. The more a Visitor understands his role as a bridge between the two, the better his confreres will understand the greater good their service is rendering to the poor both in a particular locale AND world-wide. And then the call to serve on an international level, in any capacity, is no longer seen as a drain on a province's personnel and resources, but as the fulfillment of a work that is the responsibility of us all.

If we are to embrace multiculturalism, solidarity, and collaboration in the Congregation, it must be done in ways that will enrich ministry

and community life. A key way they can help us is by renewing the missionary fervor of our Vincentian vocation.

Unfortunately, the opposite is true: those who are resistant to multiculturalism, solidarity, and collaboration often lack an ability to see beyond themselves and their own immediate needs. They miss the joy that comes from working together, sharing a common goal, and achieving results that benefit all, especially the poor. Gradually, the isolation can lead to a sense of aimlessness and ennui. Efforts slow and eventually cease, and a Vincentian vocation will be lost. At times, we get the impression that pessimism has taken root in the hearts of some confreres – it does not help us live in a faith-filled and hopeful way.

Hope is not the conviction that something will always turn out well, but the certainty that it makes sense, regardless of how things turn out. To have hope, we need courage. Such courage entails letting one's heart and convictions take the lead and not depend solely on rational, mental calculations or fears from past experiences. It takes courage to open ourselves up to multicultural experiences and look beyond our own comfort zones. We need to enter into solidarity for a greater good, and collaborate in achieving common goals. It takes courage to say, "Let's do this together", instead of wanting to do it *my* way, or seeing *my* way as the *only* way.

There remains in each of us the potential for an even greater willingness to be transformed in the name of our Christian faith and Vincentian charism. ***Multiculturalism, solidarity, and collaboration*** have made a tremendous difference in the lives of those who have embraced them. They can make a difference in all of our lives. Let us pray that the Lord will give us the courage of conversion to embrace multiculturalism, solidarity, and collaboration as we prepare for the 2016 General Assembly.