

# OF CURRENT INTEREST

## The Vincentian Family: An Horizon of Creative Fidelity

“Enlarge the space for your Vincentian tent,  
thus creating a large network of charity and mission!”

Eli Chaves dos Santos, C.M.

It is difficult to offer here a complete analysis of the reality and the recent development of the Vincentian Family. Nevertheless, the path that the Vincentian Family has traveled along allows us to observe, as well as to project, an horizon of accomplishments and of future possibilities, an horizon of limitations and of strengths. Two very suggestive images enable us to characterize that horizon. First, in light of the fact that the prophet Isaiah invited Israel *to enlarge the space of your tent* (Isaiah 54:2) in order to nourish their hope of liberation from exile, we can now view the Vincentian Family as “a space” and a tool that nourishes our hope and impels us to enlarge the tent of the Vincentian vocation, renewing and expanding the lived experience of the inheritance that we have received from Saint Vincent and his followers. Second, in light of the dream of Blessed Frédéric Ozanam, who desired *to build a network of charity*, we can also dream about and view the Vincentian Family as a reality and a promise that provides a guarantee with regard to that network of charity. In other words, it is the Vincentian Family that provides a dynamic and an organizational structure for all of our efforts; it is the Vincentian Family that enables us to discern and embrace new and creative commitments and services with regard to mission and charity, commitments and services that cannot only benefit the poor, but that can also be done with the poor.

[1] The Vincentian Family is a reality that has become more visible and active within the present ecclesial situation: there are more than 60 congregations and associations and a countless number of people who live their Christian faith through the mystique of Vincent de Paul and who, as a result of said Vincentian inspiration, are promoting, in more than 80 countries on the five continents, numerous activities of accompaniment and collaboration. Among those persons (both lay and consecrated individuals, members and non-members of congregations and associations), there is a growing awareness of belonging to the one spiritual family that shares a common Vincentian heritage

of service on behalf of the poor, a heritage that is lived out in a wide variety of organizational forms, spiritual practices, and pastoral services. This experience is not something that is exclusive to the Vincentian charism. The same reality is occurring in other congregations and associations that share other similar charismatic and spiritual experiences. This phenomena in the Catholic Church, the so-called “spiritual families,” is the result of a growing awareness of the richness and the diversity of the charisms and spiritualities that the Spirit has bestowed upon the People of God. In sharing those gifts, consecrated individuals and lay persons are joined together by fraternal bonds and organize themselves so as to live out their faith in a more vibrant manner and collaborate in fulfilling the Church’s mission.

[2] It is in the midst of this wide-reaching “rainbow of gifts and spiritualities” that are part of today’s church that the Vincentian Family becomes present and continues to grow. Its life and activity is developed in the midst of a pastoral dynamic that can be summarized, more or less, in four lines of action:

[a] *A search to understand and deepen the fraternal bonds* among the congregations, the associations, and the individuals who share in the Vincentian charism. An incredible number of activities is being done in order to celebrate, to build up, and to strengthen (affectively and spiritually) the Vincentian brotherhood/sisterhood. Such sharing and celebration and understanding of the diversity and the uniqueness of each branch enables us to understand the richness and the breadth of the Vincentian charism. Lay and consecrated individuals are deepening their understanding of membership in this large family, are strengthening the bonds of communion, and are journeying together, joined by the common ideal of following Jesus Christ, evangelizer and servant of the poor.

[b] *The promotion of formation* in order to deepen, spread, and embrace the Vincentian charism in light of the present cries of the poor. There are many initiatives in which we see people searching for a greater knowledge of Saint Vincent, his charism and spirituality. They are doing so in order to share and deepen their understanding of the Vincentian mission that they are called to concretize in their specific branch of the Vincentian Family. That understanding of the Vincentian mission enables the members to encourage mutual assistance and to engage in a renewed process of evangelization of the poor. We see a significant presence and participation of the laity in this area of formation and of spreading the Vincentian charism. This, in turn, reveals the relevance and the attractiveness of the Vincentian charism. The laity are not simply passive consumers but have become active subjects in the revitalization of our charism and our spirituality, as

well as in the development of a proper manner in which we are to live our Vincentian vocation.

[c] *The search for organization* so that we can walk together and encourage mutual collaboration. The awareness of being members of a family, which is constantly growing and becoming more diversified as a result of distinct realities, has led us to embrace certain organizational structures of participation and coordination that have enhanced joint action. On various levels, coordination teams and service teams have been organized and these teams have created further possibilities for collaboration in fulfilling the Vincentian mission. These organizational efforts, while respecting and accepting that which is proper to each branch of the family, have attempted to create new mechanisms and opportunities for communion and participation.

[d] *The effort to promote joint action with regard to the mission and charity* in order to better serve those persons who are poor. Our activity, as a Vincentian Family, (activity which is developed within the context of an ecclesiology of communion), is intended to encourage a relationship of reciprocity in which we unite our efforts in order to engage in joint projects of service to benefit those men and women who are poor. In light of Saint Vincent's practice of service that is done "by words and by works," the Vincentian Family attempts to renew the content, the methodology, and the practices of its process of evangelization in order to revitalize the Vincentian mission. Various initiatives of joint action of service on behalf of the poor are being carried out with the participation of different branches and with a creative methodology that goes beyond providing day-to-day assistance. This experience of joint action with regard to the evangelization of the poor constitutes a profound experience of reciprocal learning, as well as an experience in which individuals discover new forms and areas of missionary and charitable service, and thus develop a creative and transforming Vincentian service.

[3] As we walk together as a Vincentian Family we can point out many fruits and achievements, as well as numerous difficulties and challenges that must be confronted.<sup>1</sup> These achievements and challenges must be embraced by all who share in the Vincentian charism since it is only in that way that we can expand the horizons of

---

<sup>1</sup> See, "The Vincentian Family: Development and Perspective," in *Vincentiana*, #3, July-September 2013, pp. 299-304, where we present some information that was gathered together as the result of a small survey conducted by the Vincentian Family Office in Rome in 2013. That survey allowed us to outline some of the achievements and advances, as well as some of the difficulties and challenges that were experienced by the various branches of the Vincentian Family.

creative fidelity; that is, that we can create the possibility for a true historical process of revitalization and reconfiguration of the Vincentian vocation.

[a] Action that is engaged in with the Vincentian Family and as a Vincentian Family offers the possibility of the creation of a new theoretical and practical space for deepening and revitalizing the Vincentian vocation. In such collaborative action, the members of the Vincentian Family go beyond their own little world and, with an attitude of humility, can join together in the search for a renewed and meaningful doctrinal foundation that enables them to understand, to justify, and to animate their Vincentian “being and acting.” The originality of this newness is the process of mutual learning in which the exchange of gifts and knowledge makes everyone both a teacher and a student. Each branch contributes its uniqueness as it goes beyond its spiritual and institutional boundaries, and, in so doing, it obtains a richer and broader understanding of the Vincentian charism. This deeper and broader understanding, this individual and collective understanding of being a Vincentian and belonging to the Vincentian Family, expands the horizons of our mission, and creates new experiences and commitments which give new ardor and new expressions which ultimately enable us to embrace the Vincentian cause of service on behalf of those persons who are poor.

[b] Action that is engaged in with the Vincentian Family and as a Vincentian Family allows the various branches and the members of the various branches to better define their place and their mission within the Church and society. In light of the possibilities and concerns of the present historical era, there is a need for every branch and every member to interpret the Vincentian charism and to assimilate and incarnate the charism into the Church and society. Collaborative action in the Vincentian Family encourages and enriches the process of ongoing interaction between the Vincentian ideal and the present historical challenges. Such collaborative action makes it possible to renew the manner in which we clothe ourselves in that charism, the manner in which we open ourselves to new attitudes, practices, and structures that enable us, in turn, to embody and live the Vincentian vocation in a renewed, faithful, and creative manner. This process helps individuals, as well as the various branches, to build up their Vincentian identity in relation to the new historical realities and challenges. This process also helps them to understand in a clear manner the apostolic nature of their mission and the fact that the beneficiaries of their ministry are to be those persons who are poor. Ultimately, all of this enables the members to better situate themselves in the social and ecclesial arena as effective agents of service on behalf of those who are poor.

[c] The possibilities that are opened by action with the Vincentian Family, widen, for each branch and for each individual member of the branch, the horizons of understanding and of embodying the Vincentian ideal, place the members in the midst of new pastoral situations, open new avenues of ministry, and enable it/he/she to engage in that ministry with new practices, new methods, and new structures. All of this impels the members to engage in a process of personal and community conversion, a process in which there is a change in attitude, in which one way of life is abandoned and a new way of life is embraced, a process which prevents the members from becoming stagnated. This Vincentian journey of mutual assistance illuminates the path that enables the various branches to move beyond conventional practices and beyond their established boundaries so that they can renew their works and ministry, develop new relationships between consecrated persons and the laity, and develop new forms of collaboration between congregations and associations in order to serve the poor with greater dynamism and efficacy.

[4] Joint action of the Vincentian Family, with all its accomplishments and possibilities, reveals to us the fact that collaboration is the fundamental element for evangelical and Vincentian fruitfulness as we journey together on this path of solidarity.

[a] Collaboration in the Vincentian Family is not mere functional activity that seeks administrative reorganization, greater precision in technical procedures, or better results and/or greater efficiency in production.<sup>2</sup> Our collaboration is rooted in the mystery of the Church and in our Vincentian spiritual experience. The Church, through the action of the Spirit, is called to create communion from the multiplicity of gifts, persons, groups, and realities. Such communion grounds and encourages collaboration and also brings to completion and illuminates such initiatives. Furthermore, it is that same communion that helps Christians discover and develop their own gifts through fraternal sharing and dialogue. Within the context of the Church (that is never isolated or turned in upon itself), the Vincentian Family is called to collaborate in the building up of communion and to do so from the perspective of the spiritual elements that are the essence of our Vin-

---

<sup>2</sup> The words that Pope Francis spoke during his meeting with the Coordinating Committee of CELAM are also valid for the Vincentian Family: *A functionalist approach has no room for mystery; it aims at efficiency. It reduces the reality of the Church to the structure of an NGO. What counts are quantifiable results and statistics. The Church ends up being run like any other business organization. It applies a sort of "theology of prosperity" to the organization of pastoral work* (Rio de Janeiro, 28 July 2013).

centian identity, that is, from the perspective of the Christian mystique of mission and charity.

[b] The ministry that Vincent de Paul engaged in was both communitarian and participative, a team ministry. In order to follow and serve Christ, evangelizer of the poor, *we need one another*. The Vincentian charism is essentially communitarian and is rooted in a collaborative dynamic. No one is sufficient in him/herself and no individual member or branch can view him/her/itself as self-sufficient, as not needing assistance from anyone else. It is interesting to note that throughout his life and ministry, Vincent de Paul, the master of collaboration, emphasized the practice of the virtue of humility and saw that virtue as indispensable for those who wished to engage in a life of service on behalf of the poor. Humility supposes a constant self-emptying and demands interdependence among people and communities. It also supposes learning together and working together, as well as viewing others as people who are gifted and who can help us grow in charity. The humble exchange of gifts requires an attitude of reciprocity, responsibility, and openness to collaboration with others. It also requires the establishment of fraternal relationships that are not based on power or self-interest. Humility empowers people to come together and to minister with great zeal in their charitable and missionary service; humility helps people become creative, enables them to discover their strengths and their possibilities, and strengthens them to transform themselves and to collaborate together as they confront the challenges and work together to achieve common objectives.

[c] In times of crisis and of great change and concern, evangelization of the poor becomes more complex and there is the ever-present risk that people will become caught up in their own little world. Such an approach feeds people's fears, makes them unbending and unwilling to compromise, and, as a result, community ideals are weakened. The option for collaboration supposes a firm and decisive attitude of reaching out to others, an ongoing search and an openness to listen to the voice of the Spirit. Collaboration supposes the effective support, as well as the active and co-responsible participation of all. Such participation, on various levels, is indispensable in order to plan projects, in order to discern the necessary means that are to be utilized and the necessary steps that have to be taken for said project to be accomplished and for individuals to commit themselves to the accomplishment of the same said project. So that all of this does not become reduced to "good intentions" or "good will," it is imperative to strengthen communion and to develop co-responsibility and the processes and mechanisms of participation, communication, and joint activity.

Pope Francis asks all Christians to be witnesses of fraternal communion: *Let everyone admire how you care for one another, and how*

*you encourage and accompany one another... We are all in the same boat and headed to the same port* (Evangelii Gaudium, #99). Engaging in activity with other members and other branches of the Vincentian Family and engaging in such activity as a Vincentian Family suggests communion and collaboration and is, indeed, a very rich undertaking, one that is also difficult and challenging. On the one hand, it is easier and more comfortable to participate in “the culture of the status quo,” in the world of the ideas and practices that are rooted in the concept that “this is the way that things have always been done.” On the other hand, to embrace a responsible option for collaboration requires courage and hard work, integrity and determination to evaluate, to discern, to change, and to make difficult decisions so that the Vincentian charism is constantly rejuvenated and renewed. We are members of the same family and our focus is Christ in the poor. The awareness of a common mission and the increased number of common concerns and challenges should lead us to move beyond ideological, cultural, and group barriers and/or interests, should lead us to strengthen our collaboration so that it becomes our preferred *modus operandi*, our preferred strategy for action. May we cultivate that spirit of communion and collaboration that will enable the Vincentian Family to develop a fruitful, evangelical action so that ultimately, it might enlarge the space of the Vincentian tent and become a great network of charity and mission.

Translated by CHARLES T. PLOCK, C.M.