

# The Vincentian Family: 400 Years of Service on Behalf of the Poor

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The Vincentian Family began in a modest manner, as a possibility, and despite the many difficulties grew and spread throughout the known world. The first branches that were established (the Confraternities of Charity, the Congregation of the Mission, and the Daughters of Charity) continue to be active even today, something that has not happened to a countless number of other groups that were inspired by Vincent de Paul (local, diocesan and/or national Congregations, as well as other movements, associations, and confraternities). At the same time that these institutions were disappearing, an equal number of groups and new branches began to appear and to grow and became rooted in many different parts of the world (the Miraculous Medal Association, the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, the Vincentian Marian Youth).

In the establishment of the three primary institutions of Saint Vincent, we can observe some characteristics that should be preserved. The events surrounding the confession of the infirm, dying man at Gannes led Madame de Gondi to ask Vincent de Paul what he could do to save people who were spiritually ignorant, abandoned, and embarrassed to confess their sins. At the same time, Vincent asked Madame de Gondi what they could do together. In Châtillon-les-Dombes, when Vincent was informed about an entire family that was infirm and told that they would die because they were unable to care for themselves, he preached his famous sermon. When he then visited the family, he noticed the large quantity of goods that the parishioners gave to them and gathered together the first group of women that would become known as the Confraternity of Charity. Vincent spoke to these women in a very moving manner, praising them for their generosity and their spontaneous response to his request. He helped these women to understand that there was no lack of charity, but rather that their charitable efforts needed organization. Later, when the bishop of Beauvais spoke to him about the problem that he encountered among the clergy, Vincent asked what he would suggest as a means to change and resolve that situation.

Thus, we immediately discover two fundamental elements with regard to the pastoral experience of our Founder: (1) he reflected back to the laity their questions and concerns and thus was able to solicit from them the initial steps and the more urgent measures that had to be taken; (2) he discovered those persons who were gifted with leader-

ship and organizational abilities and formed them to become multipliers of his evangelical, pastoral, and charitable activity.

Vincentian research articles, published by Missionaries who desire to deepen our understanding of the intuitions of Vincent de Paul, reveal that our Founder was not only a great initiator and valiant and bold pioneer, but was also a loyal collaborator who entered into partnerships with others so that their dreams and/or insights might be realized. Vincent's confidence and his faith in the presence of God in the midst of the machinations and the dynamics of history made him feel an urgency in obtaining results (this was especially true as Vincent listened to the cries of those persons who were suffering and/or wounded and/or exploited). His words are like those of a general: *we were to run to the spiritual needs of our neighbor as if we were running to a fire.*<sup>1</sup>

We know Saint Vincent and have frequently deepened this knowledge with good results. What I will comment on here, I see in the various branches of the Family and so I highlight it and commemorate it.

### SEASONED FRUITS OF CHARITY

I spent 12 years in Rome as Assistant General, six years during the second term of Father Richard McCullen and six more years during the first of Father Robert Maloney. Among my many responsibilities, I was asked to represent the General Council at the various meetings of the Vincentian Family. Through my participation in the General Assemblies of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society (Paris) and the various anniversaries of the Society (the United States), I came to a deeper understanding of the ministry and the guidelines that oriented the members of this Society. On 11 different occasions I met with the members of the Vincentian Marian Youth of Spain (Torre de Benegalbón), meetings which involved the participation of young men and women, confreres, Sisters from Portugal (and later, Sisters from Africa). I participated in executive committee meetings and general assemblies of the AIC, as well as various international and continental meetings/seminars of the various branches.

[1] During my first years in this role, I participated in meetings of the **AIC** with Father Jan Dekkers, a Dutch confrere who had been appointed by the Vatican to the position of International Ecclesiastical

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<sup>1</sup> *Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, translated and edited by Jaqueline Kilar, DC; and Marie Poole, DC; et al; annotated by John W. Carven, C.M.; New City Press, Brooklyn and Hyde Park, 1985-2014; volume XI, p. 25; future references to this work will be inserted into the text using the initials [CCD] followed by the volume number, then the page number, for example, CCD:XI:25.

Assistant to the AIC. Later, Father Michel Lloret was appointed by the Vatican Secretary of State to the same position and then, Cardinal Sodano appointed me to that position. As a result of that appointment I had two roles, one that was entrusted to me by the Superior General and another that had been entrusted to me by the Vatican.

I have greatly admired the work, the enthusiasm, the successes, and the initiatives of the volunteers. Information was shared among the participants in their international meetings and in their continental and/or regional seminars. When I had the opportunity, I presented this same information to the confreres and the Sisters and to the other branches of the Vincentian Family. Among the many outstanding elements, I mention here the formation documents that this group produces. These documents are written to enhance the formation of its members and to provide a certain uniformity to its practices (it is hoped that these documents will result in effective ministry). The texts of these documents are written from a perspective that takes into account diverse sociological, philosophical, and technical categories. These texts are then presented to the local groups for their reflection. A very competent team is involved in writing, analyzing, and commenting on these documents before a final edition is sent to the local groups. It should be noted here that these texts are also translated into various languages so that this information can be utilized by groups in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Europe.

The volunteers of the AIC were the first individuals in the Vincentian Family to participate in such international organizations as the UN, UNESCO, FAO, the European Parliament, etc. The members of the Congregation followed them in participating in such organizations. I have experienced the seriousness of the preparation of the members and the various documents that the AIC presents to these different international organizations. Their voice is heard and taken into consideration because they represent thousands and thousands of persons (for example, they took polls that involved thousands of people and were able to present information with regard to family problems, political refugees, literacy, the situation of indigenous people, etc.).

The overall themes of the General Assembly of the AIC are studied by the groups on the various continents and regions (taking into consideration the diversity and demands of the different realities in which the members find themselves).

One of the concrete means that this group has utilized is that of financing the airfare of the delegates from poor nations. In this way, no nation remains unrepresented in their general assemblies and/or international seminars.

Note the following specific decision of the AIC in Spain: the members are no longer called *Ladies* or *Damas of Charity*, but are referred to as *volunteers*. In this way men have now been incorporated into the AIC,

returning once again to the idea of forming mixed groups, something that characterized the Association when it was first established during the time of Vincent de Paul.

[2] With regard to the **Saint Vincent de Paul Society**, I want to highlight the spread of the missionary dimension, especially in light of the fact that the Society was established in every country in the Soviet Bloc when the borders of these countries were opened and/or when it was rumored that the borders were about to be opened. Another significant dimension of the activity of the Conferences is their concern for young people, as seen in the activity of the members as they form and organize youth groups in a very competent manner.

Here we highlight for the members of the Congregation of the Mission #38 of the Statutes:

*Candidates who want to enter the Congregation should already have made an option for the Christian life, a commitment to apostolic work, and the choice of working within the Vincentian community; otherwise, they are to be gradually helped toward these choices in pastoral-action youth groups, or in apostolic schools where they are available.*

Therefore, in order to awaken and cultivate vocations, the Missionaries ought to minister with the young members of the Conferences since this is exactly what our Statutes point out; that is, our candidates, in addition to making an option for the Christian life and in addition to a commitment to apostolic work, ought to minister within the Vincentian community.

Another important dimension is the twinning of national conferences in order to assure the necessary financial resources for their various works, for the formation of their members, the organization of seminars, of offices, and professional formation, etc.

I want to point out something that I have witnessed in Colombia: providing young men and women with an opportunity to study and therefore using study as a means to overcome drug trafficking, drug addiction, violence, organized crime. Such an effort follows the thinking and the intuitions of Frédéric Ozanam: *the poor do not want alms but want education.*

[3] The members of the **Miraculous Medal Association** in Spain have brought the image of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal to more than 50,000 families (thus carrying out the instructions of Vincent and Frédéric Ozanam, namely, *to go to the poor, to go to those places where the poor are found, to feel their breathing upon your face*). In an effort to renew this apostolate, the Missionaries and the Daughters have decided:

- a) to move from a devotional ministry to a ministry of evangelization and
- b) to catechize adults so that they are able to communicate and transmit the faith to their children.

In other words, rather than spend the time of the visit reciting the rosary or praying some litany and singing hymns, this time will be spent in proclaiming the Word of God, reflecting upon the significance of a God and a Mother who live among us. Time will also be dedicated to dialogue on such themes as the obligations of parents, matrimonial obligations and duties, the value of family prayer, the need for prayer in the life of children, participation in the activities of the parish, ways to influence the society in which one lives.

In the United States, the Associations in Perryville and Philadelphia have the support of millions of Christians who participate in the perpetual novena and who remain united to the Association through correspondence and through their financial contributions (25 cents a year). These contributions have made it possible to build seminaries, an infirmary for the sick Missionaries, some churches, repair of rectories, etc.

The Association takes on another form, one in which the devotees are able to gather together on a weekly basis, for example in the Provincial House of the Daughters of Charity in Cali (Columbia), and there, throughout the day, the Missionaries are available to hear the confessions of the faithful (something that seems to be difficult to do in the larger cities and yet something that is basic to Vincentians).

[4] The **Vincentian Marian Youth** are a blessing that God has bestowed upon the Church. This group was established as a result of the apparition of the Blessed Mother to Saint Catherine Labouré. During 11 years, we witnessed the Daughters of Charity involved in programs of formation for countless young men and women. This systematic approach of catechesis resulted in the sending forth of thousands of young people each year. These young men and women became involved in various ministries that they had chosen and were accompanied by Missionaries and Daughters of Charity in Spain. At the same time, many young men and women were sent forth to participate in international missions in the poor countries of Africa and Latin America. The desire to unite formation and mission led to offering these young individuals courses in theology, liturgy, pastoral ministry, and Vincentian studies (these courses were made available to the young people on a yearly basis). Professors, specialized in various areas of study, gave these courses (confreres and nationally recognized theologians). Many of these young people have offered testimony as to the impact of being accompanied by the Daughters. These young

men and women, enthusiastic and filled with a missionary spirit, have raised funds in their schools and parishes to support the young missionaries who minister for a specific period of time in Mozambique, Bolivia, Argentina, Mexico, and Cuba.

Some of these young people set down roots in the countries where they are missioned. The first such individuals became the founding members of what has become known as MISEVI (Lay Vincentian Missionaries), one of the more recent branches of the Vincentian Family (this group was formally recognized by John Paul II during the time that Father Maloney was Superior General).

Another wonderful fruit of the VMY has been the establishment of the Vincentian Marian Families which originated from young men and women (members of the VMY) who came to know one another through their annual and local meetings and then married; also through efforts to support young men and women and their families who provided assistance to the members of the VMY in their assemblies, summer courses, seminars, etc.

When I saw that this movement was composed of families formed by young couples, it seemed to me that it would be better to reinforce the existing adult groups of the Vincentian Family so that when the young men and women concluded their catechumenal journey in the VMY they could then join the AIC or the Vincent de Paul Society.

Following the line of thought of Statute #38, Father Jesús María Lusarreta has stated that young people after having made *an option for the Christian life and a commitment to apostolic work, as well as a choice of working within the Vincentian community, should be open to the possibility of a vocation to the Congregation or to the Company of the Daughters of Charity.*

If today we are startled by the decreasing number of religious vocations in so many countries throughout Europe and the Americas (a sign of the times), we should, however, rejoice in the fact that there are many laypersons willing to minister with and for the poor. That is, in fact, a sign of the Kingdom, more powerful than any sign of the times. It is clear that this new perspective should lead us to change our manner of ministering, our style of leadership, the manner in which our works and ministries are organized. Any form of clericalism becomes unacceptable and we should not be concerned about centralizing our works nor attempting to maintain control of decision-making structures.

We have seen that affirming the laity in their ministry was a characteristic of Vincent's approach to ministry (discovering and developing leaders to continue the mission). For an institution, such as the Church, congregations and associations are a source of healing, a powerful force to be reckoned with, prophetic institutions that call us

to be faithful to the present and that lead us toward a future as we continue to follow the signs of the times.

Vincent realized that the Congregation would never be the same as it was at the time of its foundation and he could never have imagined all that God would expect of us or all that God would have us become, if we were focused on being faithful and attentive to our vocation.

### **THROUGHOUT THE YEARS, NEW FORMS OF SERVICE ON BEHALF OF THE POOR**

Let me begin this section with the following observation: We, as members of the Vincentian Family, are alive and well! We are more numerous than our predecessors were at the time of Saint Vincent. We continue to be involved in some of the same works as our precursors and, since 1660, we have become involved in many other ministries and initiatives too. During these 400 years, we have moved in directions that Saint Vincent would not have imagined. Nevertheless, it was our Founders who opened the doors and sent their followers to various countries. Today, the missionary dimension is one of the characteristic elements of the branches of the Vincentian Family. Today there are millions of Vincentians in more than 200 countries throughout the world.

There is a great dynamism in the Vincentian charism and this can be illustrated by the very power of charity that is revealed in the various attitudes, activities, and undertakings of the members of the Vincentian Family.

Here we are not simply referring to geographical expansion and growth, but rather we become aware of a qualitative presence, an apostolic presence in new works, in numerous schools for poor children in India and the Philippines and the United States, and formation centers for young adults and adolescents. We have learned how to utilize the means of social communication and have become present on the "social networks." We have been able to make Vincentian and apostolic material and/or information available on the Internet and continue to nourish these sites with new information and formation material.

Even though we have already mentioned this fact, we once again remind our readers of the presence of the Vincentian Family in international organizations, international congresses, etc. We should also be mindful of the international character of the General Curia (of the Missionaries, as well as of the Daughters) and the international character of the executive committee of the various branches and all the consequences that such a movement has entailed (respect for other cultures, practices, preferences, etc.). In this regard we note the designation of official languages in the Congregation (French, Spanish, and

English), languages that are used in General Assemblies, in the various formation courses at the International Formation Center located at the Motherhouse in Paris (there courses are offered to young confreres as well as to older confreres and, more recently, to the laity), and in official publications (*Vincentiana*). Permanent teams of translators have enabled all of us to respond to the need for greater and more effective communication.

Some years ago, we established continental conferences of Visitors: CLAPVI for Latin America and the Caribbean, APVC for Asia and the Pacific, COVIAM for Africa and Madagascar, CEVIM for Europe and the Middle East, NCV for the United States. These conferences provide a forum for planning on a continental basis and for effective mediation with regard to various problems. During these meetings, there is an exchange of experiences and interprovincial activities are decided. Today, the publication of CLAPVI has become an incredible collection of studies and experiences, of proposals and accomplishments that can be grouped together in four areas: popular missions, new evangelization, formation of our members, and ministry of lay Vincentians in the various branches.

Since 1994 and under the leadership of Father Robert Maloney, the ongoing promotion and organization of the Vincentian Family were intensified. Since the first meeting (February 1994) it is no longer possible to speak about the Double Family (that is, the Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity) since at that time the four primary branches of the Family gathered together (the AIC, the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, the Missionaries, and the Daughters). In subsequent years, other Vincentian groups, movements, Congregations, and Associations from various parts of the world have been invited to participate in these meetings. In the General Assemblies of the Congregation (1992 and 1998), there was a significant participation of the various branches. We have become accustomed to minister through means of projects, organizing networks of people to work together in common projects, establishing programs to assist refugees in Europe. In these projects, we see members from various organizations coming together for a common purpose.

One of the visible fruits of these efforts toward unity and collaboration has resulted in being able to put pressure on unjust structures in countries where poverty exists in a scandalous manner (this pressure has been the result of various campaigns directed toward the elimination of malaria, toward systemic change). These have been long-term projects planned, organized, and directed by an international team composed of members from the various branches of the Vincentian Family. In addition to the book, *Seeds of Hope*, there have been national and continental gatherings to instruct the memberships about some of the basic elements of systemic change.

With regard to Vincentian studies, the International Formation Center in Paris has opened its doors to the wider Vincentian Family and the International Secretariat for Vincentian Studies has done the same. We have seen courses offered in the area of Islamic Studies (which moves us beyond the saga of Vincent as a slave in Africa).

Today we have many opportunities for common formation which strengthen the unity of the various branches and reinforce the members in their ministry.

### **THE “WHY” OF RECONFIGURATION**

In this overview of the accomplishments of the charism, of the manner in which the charism has been concretized during these first four centuries of its history, we find some of the branches confronting an institutional crisis, a crisis that has developed among the Missionaries and the Daughters as the result of a reduction of their numbers in some parts of the world. Today there is much talk about “reconfiguration” and reorganization of the provinces and interprovincial ministries. Thus, it is hoped that the reduced number of personnel can be used in ever more effective ways and it is also hoped that some of the historical apostolates might also be continued.

The light that enlightens this effort ought to be clear and direct: we engage in the process of reconfiguration not simply to insure the survival of the Congregation or the Company, but rather we want to continue the mission. In other words, we engage in the process of reconfiguration not simply to survive but to serve in a more effective manner.

Those who are concerned with the survival of the institution will attempt to establish measures that will regularize our customs, practices, and apostolates. This is done in order to recover and reinforce “sacred, traditional practices,” but practices, nevertheless, that are no longer practical or effective. At the same time, there will be an attempt to maintain works and historical buildings, an attempt to recover things that are simply gone and no longer part of present-day consciousness. There will be an attempt to write guides that will direct various groups of people as they engage in their ministry.

Those, however, who desire to see a continuity in the mission, will seek out new experiences and not attempt to write new directories; they will attempt to learn from those persons who minister in a bold manner. This implies that individuals direct their vision toward the future (and that they do this in a responsible and conscious manner rather than in a fearful and hopeless manner).

It is only from this perspective that we can speak of 400 years of service on behalf of the poor.

## CONCLUSION

[1] The Vincentian Family is not some ancient ruin, but is a large living organism, animated by its own proper spirit, and born from the heart of God. Its charism was communicated to Vincent de Paul and countless congregations, movements, and organizations share in this same charism, as a result of claiming Vincent de Paul as their founder, inspiration, model, and prophet. The members of these various groups attempt to follow Vincent de Paul as they engage in ministry on behalf of those who are poor.

[2] The vitality of the Spirit of God always creates an inexhaustible dynamism (a dynamism that is operative and omnipresent) in the Church and in the midst of other charismatic groups.

[3] As heirs to the spirit of Saint Vincent, we, with the help of the creative grace of God, have a responsibility to keep his charism alive. It is in this way that we experience the presence of the Lord in the various efforts of the Vincentian Family; for example, in the organization of its secretariats, its archives, its databases, its documents, and in the new forms of presence among those people who are poor (representation of the various branches at the UN, UNESCO, FAO, the European Union, the Pontifical Council Cor Unum, etc.), and in the communication efforts that are taking place at every level.

[4] The world has experienced incredible changes since the death of Vincent de Paul. Nevertheless, we all continue to pray for vocations and we are involved in various ways in the promotion of vocations. We have opened new formation centers and with new methods and new techniques we have become involved in providing for those in need.

[5] It is also clear that the members of the Congregation are concerned about the decrease in numbers in certain provinces. At the same time, however, we have witnessed an incredible irruption of the laity in the various ministries of the Church. God calls us to view this new reality as a sign of the Kingdom and not merely a sign of the times. May we be courageous, bold, and creative in accepting the presence of the laity, in encouraging them and forming them; may we be willing to learn from them and minister with them collaboratively. Together with the laity may we provide for all the poor whom God sends to us. May the same Spirit of God that leads us to minister in the formation of the laity also enable us to learn from them and to minister together with them.

[6] If we continue to minister with and for those persons who are poor, we should not fear that we will disappear as a Family.

[7] With regard to the various mechanisms and dynamics that I referred to above, the daily ministry of the members of our large

Vincentian Family may not be sufficiently clear. Yet it should be very obvious that the charity – which the members of the various Vincentian branches offer to those who are poor, as well as the ministry of the Vincentian Family, which frees, promotes, and offers the forgotten members of society a new life – that such charity and ministry are, in the words of our Founder, creative unto infinity. Some of the new ways in which this charity is offered can be seen in the efforts of the Vincentian Solidarity Office, the Missionary Fund (a collection that is taken every year), awards that are given to the most creative social projects, the efforts to foster and support native vocations in the various mission regions. All these efforts would not be classified as traditional because they are very concrete and also very effective. What I said in recognition of the generosity and the services of the branches was the result of listening to what I would call the heartbeat of God. We know that a strong heart is maintained and driven by small but active, integrated cells, growing together, animated by the breathing of fresh air and by the circulation of blood. In order to affirm and celebrate the 400 years of service of the Vincentian Family, service on behalf of those individuals who are poor, we must affirm the specific service of each one of the millions of people who are in the trenches, that is, who are involved in the mission, in the parishes, in the seminaries, in the hospitals, in the schools; that is, in every charitable gesture that is the fruit of the Spirit of God who dwells among us. During the next 400 years, we must strengthen, with the openness of our Founder, our commitment to service, to collaboration. In this way we will continue to be life-giving members of that long line of followers, people of good will, people who continue to proclaim good news to the poor.

A personal observation: I hope that in a future edition of *Vincentiana*, readers might be presented with a study of the 400 years of service to the clergy and the formation of the laity and our responsibility with regard to said ministries (an essential of our foundation and our charism).

Translated: CHARLES T. PLOCK, C.M.