

The Vincentian Marian Youth Association and the Vincentian Family: A Charism at the Service of the Kingdom

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Recent years have provided the Vincentian Family with many opportunities to return to its origins, to rediscover the beauty of its charism, and to be hopeful with regard to its dream of a world in which all people live together as brothers and sisters and in which justice and love are the ultimate values that guide collective and individual decisions.

Perhaps it would be good to take some time to reflect on the manner in which a youth association, such as the Vincentian Marian Youth Association, has embodied this charism and has, in fidelity to its identity, made every effort to incarnate the plan of God in the manner of Vincent de Paul.

Vincentian in its origin and history

During the time of renewal that followed the Second Vatican Council, the Vincentian character has been explicitly formulated as one of the marks of the Association. In Article #5 of the International Statutes we read: *Through its birth in the Family of St. Vincent de Paul, it is inspired by the Vincentian charism and makes evangelization and service of the poor distinctive characteristics of its presence in the Church. Its members commit themselves to be missionaries, witnessing to the love of Christ by word and work.*

We never want to forget the fundamental event that makes the VMY a Vincentian Association; namely, during the 19th century and at the request of the Blessed Virgin, this group came into existence in order to reach out to poor young men and women. Catherine Labouré, through the intercession of the Blessed Mother, requested Father Aladel to establish an association of young people who would consecrate their lives to the Blessed Mother. The Congregation of the Blessed Mother was a similar organization that existed for the students at the various Jesuit educational institutions. The essential difference in this new association was that it provided a means for young men and women of limited resources to grow in their faith. In that sense, then, the present fidelity of the VMY to the Vincentian charism can be measured by its presence on the social and ecclesial peripheries.

Throughout its history, the Association of the Sons and Daughters of Mary (today, the Vincentian Marian Youth Association), has understood the meaning of fidelity. While it is impossible to recount here the complete history of the Association, we want to take the time to mention some significant events in which the manner in which the members lived the charism proved to be essential with regard to the continuity of Vincentian service. We will limit ourselves here to two examples: Eritrea and Mexico.

In 1886 in Keren, eight years after the arrival of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, the Daughters of Mary came into existence. After nine years of zealous effort the Association ceased to exist as a result of the Italian occupation and the expulsion of the French Missionaries. Nevertheless, the Daughters of Mary, laywomen who had consecrated themselves to Mary and who were known as *enaties* (mothers), continued to offer spiritual service to the Christian community: they ministered as catechists and leaders of prayer, they visited parishioners in their homes and supported the pastors in various ways. That activity gave a continuity to the work that had been initiated and the situation continued in the same manner until the return of the Missionaries (this time, Italian Confreres) who, on 8 December 1949, established the Daughters of Mary in Hebo.

A similar situation occurred in Mexico. When the Daughters of Charity were expelled from that country in 1875, the Daughters of Mary gathered together to pray for the health and the return of the Sisters. Sister Pilar Ruiz, DC, author of the book entitled, *La Compañía de la Hijas de la Caridad en la Segunda Venida a Mexico* [The Second Coming of the Daughters of Charity to Mexico] states: *The works of the Little Company in Mexico were sustained and continued by those persons who had been formed during the course of thirty years of self-denial and sacrifice. The Daughters of Mary committed themselves to preserving the faith and the practice of charity and were hopeful that the Sisters would return.* With the prospect of the return of the Sisters, Father José Manuel Segura, C.M., the spiritual director of the Sisters, established a hospital for the poor and this initiative was supported by the Ladies of Charity (today known as the AIC). Immediately a number of the Daughters of Mary offered to serve as volunteers in this new ministry. Sister Pilar describes their activity: *Generous in their commitment, persevering in their effort, steadfast in their dedication to the poor, faith-filled women, simple and trusting in the goodness of God who listens to the prayer of "the little ones"... this description can perhaps be seen as a portrait of a good daughter of Vincent de Paul, that is, those women who followed our founder and discovered Christ in the poor. These Daughters of Mary ministered with great effectiveness and when the time came they had no hesitation in handing their work over to others.* Many of these young women later entered the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

These historical events enable us to see how the grace of God was active in the Daughters of Mary (VMY) who lived in the midst of some very complex situations. These exceptional cases highlight the very essence of this Association that was created for the poor and that was imbued with the same spirit that was gifted to the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, a spirit of collaboration in service on behalf of the more vulnerable members of society.

Living the Vincentian charism in the midst of the present-day Church and society

Aware of its own history and vocation, the members of the VMY have attempted to embody the ideal of “Living, Contemplating, and Serving”; living that ideal from the perspective of following Jesus Christ, with Mary, and in the manner of Vincent de Paul. The specific forms of that commitment have been revealed through a variety of activities and initiatives whose impact is verified in the experience of personal conversion, as well as in the experience of individual and community commitments on behalf of those persons who are poor.

The recent General Assembly (Salamanca, July 2015) provided us with an opportunity to become more aware of the various ways in which the members of the VMY evangelize and serve. One activity called “VMY on the Peripheries” revealed our presence in many marginalized places where Christ has called us: accompanying immigrants (Spain and Italy), accompanying children and families (Madagascar, Poland, and other places), among motorcyclists (Brazil), the disabled (Slovakia), the victims of natural disasters (the Philippines), in the midst of violence (Colombia and Syria). Our presence on the sixth continent and on the Internet and the various social networks was also highlighted (Italy). The various means of communication and creativity in utilizing these means have provided us with a tool that enhances our encounter with others, strengthens our ability to spread the gospel, and enables us to reach out to other young men and women in our neighborhoods and parishes. Aware of all its possibilities and its risks, this is a continent where our presence should be even more visible in order to be more effective.

In many situations evangelization and service on behalf of those less fortunate have been accomplished through various missionary experiences. The members of the VMY have joined together with the Missionaries, the Daughters of Charity, and with the members of the other branches of the Vincentian Family and participated in popular missions, thus responding to the call of the Church and the cries of our brothers and sisters, who are most in need. We mention here the missionary experiences of the VMY in Europe and Latin America.

Since 1984, the VMY in Spain has provided its members with an opportunity to engage in a missionary experience (for an extended period of time or for a limited period of time). After a time of preparation, these young missionaries were sent to Honduras, Bolivia, and Mozambique, where they proclaimed the gospel through various evangelization activities and projects that served the people of those communities. In collaboration with the other members of the Vincentian Family, these young men and women responded to the call of Christ to reach out to people beyond the boundaries of their homeland, to discover new realities in which Christ has become present in the most impoverished of our brothers and sisters, and to allow themselves to be transformed by those missionary experiences. As a result of those missionary experiences a permanent community of lay missionaries was created in 2001; namely, MISEVI, the youngest member of the Vincentian Family. The members of the VMY from other countries also began to serve as lay missionaries; for example, members of the VMY in Portugal are ministering in Mozambique and members of the VMY in Italy are ministering in Albania.

At the same time that the VMY in Spain initiated such missionary experiences, the VMY in Latin America also began to organize itself in a similar but distinct manner. The First Latin American Encounter of the Association was held in the Dominican Republic in 1992. That was followed by the Second Encounter (1995) which was held in Mexico and which gave life to the organization that became known as EMLA [Latin American Mission Encounter]. The primary focus of this group became participation in the popular missions that were given in the various countries of that region. We highlight here the fact that the missionary dimension of these encounters came to the surface as a result of the lived experience of the members. In this sense, EMLA provided members with an international experience of the missionary commitment that was being lived by the young men and women in their country of origin.

In addition to these specific examples, the Vincentian charism continues to be lived in the countless groups of our Association, all of which acquired a very clear international identity with the approval of International Statutes and the establishment of an International Secretariat (1999).

From the time of its First General Assembly (Rome, 2000) the VMY has formulated its general guidelines in such a way that they have focused on five well-defined areas: (1) spiritual life, (2) formation, (3) apostolate and evangelization, (4) Vincentian collaboration (5) the care and use of material goods. There is a very close relationship among these various aspects of the life of the Association and, as a result, some of our commitments could be seen as fulfilling the objectives that are listed under more than one of those above-mentioned areas. Nevertheless, the decision to focus on those specific areas arose from a dynamic

that moved from “being” (spiritual life, formation) to “doing” (apostolate, collaboration, care of material goods). Perhaps, without even being aware of it, the Association has continually returned to those elements that are essential: growth in the faith that leads to conversion, credible witness of God’s love to those persons who are poor, recognition of the fact that the mission requires certain financial means.

With regard to the content of these five-year plans/commitments, it becomes clear that the Association has evolved and yet it would be difficult to outline that development in this limited space. I simply want to present here some of our convictions that are expressed in the commitments that are also the fruit of our dialogue during the Assembly and the fruit of the evaluation of the previous Final Documents (an evaluation that was done by the International Team and representatives from the member countries). The guidelines offered in the Final Document of each General Assembly have become a tool that establishes priorities and challenges for the members of the Association who want to remain faithful to their origin. These guidelines are in no way intended to stifle the creativity that is so proper to young people and also so necessary in the present world.

Challenges for the VMY and its members to live the Vincentian Charism

In each one of the sections of the Final Document of the General Assembly 2015 there is specific reference to the Vincentian charism that the Association wishes to live and to share. Even though it is impossible to reproduce here the entire document, we want to highlight some of the commitments that it contains:

[1.4.] *We will deepen our understanding of the treasure contained in our Marian-Vincentian spirituality and we will attempt to make others aware of said spirituality. In this way, as we live out the virtues enumerated in our International Statutes, we become contemplatives in action.*

[3.3.] *We encourage concrete experiences of involvement in the school of the poor in order that we might be evangelized by those individuals who are our lords and masters.*

[3.4.] *We recognize the fact that evangelization is not only a proclamation of good news but is also a denunciation of the injustices that overshadow the world. We can do this by cooperating with the various extant ecclesial and civil institutions.*

[3.5.] *We will motivate young men and women to be protagonists, utilizing informal preaching as a strategy of evangelization (Evangelii Gaudium, ## 127-128).*

[3.6.] *We will actively and generously participate in the promotion, preparation, and carrying out of popular missions.*

[4.1.] *We will promote an understanding of the origins of Vincentian collaboration and the reality of the distinct branches that minister beside us.*

[4.2.] *We will encourage the creation of shared formation programs that will result in a common commitment.*

[4.3.] *In collaboration with the other branches of the Vincentian Family, we will propose projects oriented toward integral human development.*

[4.4.] *We will accompany the young men and women in their process of vocational discernment so that they are able to identify the gifts that they have received and also able to engage in a process of transition from one branch to another.*

These commitments suggest the path that the VMY proposes to travel during the next five years as it joins together with the other branches of the Vincentian Family in the various countries in order to unite contemplation with action, to deepen their understanding of the charism, to commit themselves to a process of evangelization and service, to denounce in a prophetic manner the present injustices, and to find within the Vincentian Family a space for growth and action.

Certainly those are not the only challenges that await the members of the VMY in the coming years or, perhaps it would be better to say, that the formulation of those commitments implies many other challenges. In order that the presence of the VMY might continue to be a significant presence, the members ought to live as people of faith, zealous, co-responsible with the other members of society, and committed in their vocation of service on behalf of the poor. This means that they become evangelizers in every aspect of their lives (family, friends, school, work, leisure) and that they also be willing to become involved in politics where the decisions that generate poverty are often made. In this way they will continue to develop their creativity, which in turn will enable them, as apostles of hope, to proclaim Jesus Christ. The members will have to clothe themselves in those attitudes that reveal the radicalness of the gospel and will also have to engage in activities that promote justice while at the same time seeking to eliminate poverty and the causes of poverty. The VMY has to offer its members opportunities so that all of this becomes possible and so that the young men and women become faith-filled adults and bold citizens who give witness to God's mercy while ministering with humility to make the Kingdom of God more present in their midst.

Challenges for the Vincentian Family

During the past 15 years, the members of the VMY have grown in their awareness of belonging to a large spiritual family. This has led the members to become involved in various projects with the other

branches of the Family. As occurs in every family, the members of the VMY have encountered obstacles with regard to giving life to the charisma in a manner that Vincent would desire. As young adults this has not always been easy. Nevertheless, the members of the Association continue to trust in this Family and in their identity as men and women who continue the mission of Jesus Christ and who follow in the footsteps of Vincent de Paul.

What we state below is not only the responsibility of the other branches of the Vincentian Family, but is also the responsibility of the members of the VMY. After 400 years of service on behalf of those persons who are poor, it seems that the Vincentian Family, in its complexity and diversity, is called to the following:

- To offer every member an opportunity to develop his/her prayer life and his/her service and to do this from the perspective of Vincentian spirituality.

- This formation should have Christ as the central focal point, the Social Doctrine of the Church as its guide, and the challenges of the present-day world as its perspective.

- To make contact with the poorest a priority over an encounter with those who are near to us or those whom we already know how to accompany. We are challenged to live among those persons who are poor and through them to discover the beauty and the joy of the gospel. This presence should not be sporadic but rather should be a lifestyle that others find attractive and impelled to imitate.

- To accept the challenge of prophetic denunciation, doing so with love and accepting all its consequences. We are called to be the voice of the voiceless whenever this might be required of us.

- To understand that all these efforts on behalf of justice and peace are meaningless unless they are accompanied by concrete and specific actions that preserve the integrity of creation. We are exhorted to experience the pain of “mother earth” and to act in a manner that relieves that pain.

- To engage in the process of evangelization. We must allow the Holy Spirit to be the protagonist of our Family and must also have the courage to question our organizational structure in order to discover those practices that create division, marginalization, a hunger for power, injustice, and the ineffective use of resources.

- To recognize the doors that are closed with regard to a shared mission, to break down the barriers that separate us as an international spiritual family and to create authentic networks of collaboration that make us effective servants and administrators of the goods of the poor.

– To put aside our outdated methods of engaging in the apostolate in order to open ourselves to the challenge of systemic change, accepting as a first step the fact that the poor should be seated around the table where we dialogue and make decisions.

– To create bridges within the family so that children, adolescents, adults, and elders continue to be inspired by the charism and continue to minister together on behalf of those persons who are poor. As long as there are some groups that feel they are more important than others, as long as there are some branches that can be identified exclusively as branches “for young people,” “for adults,” or “for elders,” we will not be a family that lives in accord with God’s plan or in accord with the dream of Vincent de Paul.

– To recognize, as individuals and as a branch, our own poverty in order to open ourselves to God’s mercy so that, in light of that perspective, we will be able to do more than we ever imagined.

As we read and reflect on those numerous challenges, we could become discouraged. If that is so, then it should be the first step that leads us out of our passivity and out of a false sense of security. As stated in the Final Document (2015) of the Vincentian Marian Youth Association: *We have the privilege of belonging to the Vincentian Family. As we follow in the footsteps of Saint Vincent de Paul we are invited to see Christ in the poor and the poor in Christ. Our unique place in the Vincentian Family gives life and hope to the continuation of this extraordinary charism which originated almost four hundred years ago. We are invited to go out in order to encounter and collaborate with the other members of this family to which we belong.*

Let us look at our Family from another perspective: there are more than 300 groups and probably more than 500,000 members. If we were all to live our lives from the perspective of the faith, charity, and boldness of Vincent, Louise, Frédéric, and Rosalie (to name a few), then we would be able to overcome the destructive forces that are so prevalent in today’s world. We would then be able to give witness to the centrality of the gospel in our life, we would be enflamed with zeal, and we would be signs of hope to those seeking to find meaning in their life. This is not an impossible mission and here we might paraphrase the words of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal: *God has entrusted us with a mission and even though we might encounter difficulties as we strive to fulfill that mission, God will bestow on us his grace.* May that conviction give us the courage to be converted into that which we are called to be: Vincentians who live a deep spirituality and who engage in a ministry of service on behalf of *our lords and masters*, the poor men and women of this era!