

# Lay Vincentian Missionaries and Vincentian Spirituality

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*The Son of God came to evangelize the poor. And are not we, Messieurs, sent for the same purpose? Yes, Missioners are sent to evangelize the poor. Oh, what a happiness to do on earth the same thing Our Lord did there, which is to teach poor persons the way to heaven!*<sup>1</sup>

The evangelizing mission of Vincent de Paul is grounded on Jesus Christ, the missionary of the Father. That perspective provides the members of the Lay Vincentian Missionary Association (MISEVI) with a way of understanding their missionary vocation in the Church and in the Vincentian Family. Furthermore, in response to the call to fulfill their baptismal commitment by proclaiming good news to the poor, they live their vocation in service of the missions *ad gentes*, sharing their faith and their life within their country of origin as well as beyond it. They do all of this in various ways: in popular missions, through their witness during vacation time, and in the permanent communities.

In 1987, some young members of the Vincentian Marian Youth Association (VMY) engaged in an experience in which they lived as lay missionaries in those places where other members of the Vincentian Family were ministering. These lay missionaries collaborated in the evangelization process by participating in different pastoral activities on the diocesan and/or local level. Some of these young men and women fulfilled their commitment in this manner for an extended period time (often involving years of service). It was those missionary experiences that gave rise to MISEVI. In 1992, some of the lay missionaries expressed a desire to establish a structure that would provide stability to their Christian commitment as laypersons, to their option for the mission, and to their ties with the Vincentian Family.

Today the members of MISEVI are ministering in Spain, Italy, France, Slovenia, Lebanon, Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador, Bolivia,

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<sup>1</sup> VINCENT DE PAUL, *Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, translated and edited by Jacqueline 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, pp. 283-284; 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:283-284.

Mozambique, Costa Rica, Colombia, Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, the United States, Lebanon, Poland, Indonesia, and other missionary groups are in the process of being formed in other countries.

Without a doubt, one of the key moments in the life of the Association has been the celebration of the various General Assemblies, which provided the delegates with time for formation and reflection on the identity of MISEVI and the paths that it would travel in coming years. The Assemblies proposed lines of action and the delegates elected an International Coordinating Team.

Father Gregory Gay, C.M., director of MISEVI, is the animator of the Association and has promoted its extension throughout the world, especially in those places where there is a presence of the Vincentian Family.

### **The spirituality of MISEVI**

*The poor are the privileged recipients of the Gospel... We have to state, without mincing words, that there is an inseparable bond between our faith and the poor. May we never abandon them (Evangelii Gaudium, # 48).*

Our lay spirituality is clearly expressed in our option for the mission and for the poor, lived out in the midst of the ecclesial community and from the perspective of the Vincentian charism. Those dimensions are at the very heart of our “being” and “doing” as lay missionaries.

We discover that living our lay missionary vocation from the perspective of the Vincentian charism is a lifestyle in which Christ is the center of our faith and the guiding force of our missionary life.

We recognize, with gratitude, the great support and accompaniment in formation that we receive from the members of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, which is essential for clarifying and strengthening our identity as members of MISEVI.

The journey that the members of MISEVI have undertaken during these years has shown us that the missionary task is vast. Each day we discover new areas of mission. Pope Francis, with his call to go out to the peripheries, questions us with regard to new places of mission and the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ to those men and women who are most poor and abandoned. He questions us about how we are living our vocation and our missionary commitment. At the same time, we feel the need to accept certain criteria that impel us to minister in a supportive manner with the poorest and most abandoned members of society.

*Today missionary activity still represents the greatest challenge for the Church and the missionary task must remain foremost (Evangelii Gaudium, # 15).*

It is with great joy and with a sense of great responsibility that we live the experience of being sent forth to the mission and thus able to minister in union with the Church and in collaboration with the Vincentian Family. As, day by day, we deepen our spirituality and our missionary activity, we offer people our youthful vitality and our specific charism as laypersons.

This missionary **spirituality** is, at all times, a motivation that gives meaning to our commitment and enables us to be faithful. That same spirituality enables us to continue to follow Jesus Christ and to respond to the universal call to holiness, by constantly searching for God's will.

To proclaim the gospel to the poor joyfully implies sharing our gifts, our faith, and our life, from a love that is affective and effective. Missionaries are called to grow and deepen their faith as a result of the lived experiences in the mission, its difficulties, challenges, and demands, there making their own the spirituality, commitment, and sense of belonging.

The missionary life commits us to encounter the presence of Christ in the faces of our poor brothers and sisters. It also invites us to become present in the midst of the world, in the reality in which we find ourselves, in accord with the will of the Father and gospel values.

In our missionary spirituality, it is most important to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus Christ, the missionary of the Father, in order to continue his plan of salvation, the proclamation of the Kingdom of God, a kingdom of justice, peace, and liberation. The missionary spirituality of MISEVI is centered on living the mystery of Christ who was sent to proclaim the good news and on collaborating with Christians and non-Christians in building a new world.

As lay missionaries, we open ourselves to the richness of the various vocations and charisms, which require us to seek ever-new forms of cooperating and sharing, following Jesus Christ, in the apostolate and the process of inculturation.

Vincentian spirituality has, as its center, an encounter with Christ in those persons who are poor. Vincent lived his entire life immersed in this mission, which was transcendental with regard to his vocation: *in serving persons who are poor, we serve Jesus Christ... And that is as true as that we are here* (CCD:IX:199).

As lay missionaries, we are called to embrace this spirituality, in order to remain faithful to the mission with deep joy. As members of the Vincentian Family, we also are called to live the virtues that Vincent saw as indispensable in the service of and closeness to the poor. Those virtues must be the characteristic sign of our acting: humility, simplicity, mortification, gentleness, and apostolic zeal, which strengthen and distinguish our mission.

Vincent found humility when he placed himself beside those persons in his time who were most abandoned: the hungry and forsaken men,

women, and children. He lived simplicity when he spoke clearly and forcefully in favor of alleviating the suffering of the poor. Vincent inspired other men and women to follow Christ and to become ministers of God's love; thus arose the communities he founded: the Confraternities of Charity (laity at the service of the poor), the Congregation of the Mission, and the Company of the Daughters of Charity. Through sacrifice, Vincent discovered a path of spiritual growth and immersion in the world of the abandoned. Vincent's asceticism (at times referred to as mortification), in a simple life without comforts, led to a multiplication of God's gifts among the poor.

The lay missionaries, if they want to follow Saint Vincent and serve Christ in the person of the poor, must live these virtues every day in their mission.

Vincent would say that the mission directs one's life toward *the poor [who] are being damned for want of knowing the things necessary for salvation* (CCD:I:112). Those people lack the necessary means and opportunities to develop fully their dignity as children of God. We know that all missionaries must make an effort to live in communion with those persons who are poor and, at the same time, must allow themselves to be evangelized by those who are poor.

Lay Vincentian missionaries must cultivate those elements that define their vocation and that enable them to respond to God's call. **We want to be light to the world and salt of the earth** and thus give witness to the three dimensions of our baptismal commitment (priest, prophet, and king). It is in this way that we respond to God's call to **serve those persons who are poorest**.

Inspired by the Vincentian charism, the laity work together in building up the Church and do so as people of faith, as credible witnesses, as collaborative ministers who communicate the Word, celebrate their faith, and live in community, thus responding to the needs of the poor from the perspective of the gospel.

As believers, we attempt to harmonize all these dimensions of our faith life through dialogue, community discernment, and the needs of the poor; thus, we seek to respond to the call that God extends to us in each moment of our history and our concrete reality.

Each community of MISEVI provides ministries that give priority to the **proclamation** of the word and **catechesis** (area of evangelization), to **life** (area of social justice), and **celebration** (area of liturgy) of the Good News in the various places where we minister.

Jesus's first disciples showed the way to cultivate a missionary spirituality. They learned how to be apostles of faith as they imitated, in their lives, the example of Jesus who was sent by the Father. Saint Vincent shows us the way to continue the mission. The missionaries of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity likewise taught us the path that we must travel as defined by our

spirituality, enlightening us with their dynamic example in prayer and in the service or apostolate, leading us to a radical dedication. Now we, as lay missionaries, men and women, are called to live profoundly as missionary-disciples of Jesus Christ and his gospel, to engage in a process of ongoing conversion in which we become more conformed to Jesus, to his lifestyle and values. In this way, we become authentic ministers and experience the interior joy that is given by the Spirit to those who live their lives from the perspective of faith.

As a result of his incarnation, Christ overcame the distances and the barriers that separate the human from the divine. He lived his life in union with the Father and the Father's plan. In fact, Jesus's life cannot be understood apart from this intimate relationship with the Father. We, as missionaries and participants in Jesus's mission, ought to be guided by the inspiration and the activity of the Holy Spirit and (as the Church recommends) we ought to live in profound unity with Jesus by means of individual and community prayer. In this way, we become, like Vincent, contemplatives in action.

*Christ accepts the human person as he/she is and becomes poor in order to incarnate himself into our weakness.* As we share in the life and the culture of the people to whom we are sent, we maintain ourselves in an ongoing dynamic. Every missionary must live with commitment the incarnation and inculturation, as an exodus, in a spirit of indifference and renunciation, accepting misunderstandings and failures as he/she fulfills the mission in imitation of Jesus Christ; that is, as he/she lives a life of integrity in the midst of the people and is willing to commit him/herself and engage his/her whole life in this task.

Pope Francis tells us: *I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization (Evangelii Gaudium, # 33).*

Lay missionaries, sent forth by their parish or country, continue the life and the mission of Jesus Christ. They do this in imitation of Vincent de Paul and at a specific time in history as they respond generously and wholeheartedly and as they immerse themselves into the reality in which they minister (loving and suffering and being formed by that reality). Thus, lay missionaries can view their mission as being accomplished together with the poor, living in their midst with attentiveness, availability, devotion, tenderness, etc. in the style of Vincent de Paul.

*The poor... are my burden and my sorrow (CCD:III:492); the poor are... our lords and masters and... we're unworthy of rendering them our little services (CCD:XI:349).* Lay missionaries have to seek, discover, and appreciate the new culture that welcomes them, and to help wherever they are sent.

Vincent found Jesus in the person of the poor, loving, serving, and evangelizing the poor and revealing to them God's love. As they proclaim the gospel with joy, the lay missionaries have to build up and announce the freedom that God offers to all people and also reveal the possibility of living a new life.

We follow the example of Jesus as we fulfill the mission that we have received, contemplating Christ in every poor person, proclaiming the kingdom of God with humility, simplicity, and love, and cultivating our spirituality. Our service on behalf of those who are poor is concretized in our gentleness and in that manner in which we draw closer to people in the mission field. Our missionary spirituality is grounded on prayer and contemplation, because we are convinced that, from them, the success of the mission is achieved, over and above the means and human resources we have: *Give me a man of prayer, and he'll be able to do anything* (CCD:XI:76).

As missionaries, we know that it is through prayer that we receive the strength and the inspiration for our ministry. Daily prayer (personal and in community), reading of the scriptures, and participation in the sacraments keep us faithful as we continue to follow Jesus.

With the passing of time, we have discovered our commitment in living the fullness of our Vincentian vocation, which leads us to seek Jesus Christ in the person of those who are poor, thus making our affective love, effective. Therefore, you will find us in schools, hospitals, and villages, etc. Saint Vincent said: *Let us love God, brothers, let us love God, but let it be with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows* (CCD:XI:32).

As we minister and love those men and women who are poor, as we work together with them in projects that improve their well-being and their education, as we live our lives with simplicity and humility and generosity, we discover a new horizon and a call to collaborate in the evangelization of those people most in need.

We live in community as Jesus did with his disciples, who left everything in order to follow him. Today, the community of Jesus is formed by those persons who fulfill the will of the Father and who live their lives from the perspective of the Kingdom of God. As members of MISEVI, we continually seek to discover and live the Father's will and his plan. Like those first disciples, we confront difficulties in following the footsteps of Jesus Christ, united in love and communion, and nourished by the same charism.

As lay missionaries, we opt for a community life, attempting to become more mature, accepting our personal and community limitations (those that limit us in our ministry on behalf of the kingdom), and we seek to live in communion for the good of the community and the ministry that we have chosen. This common lifestyle is supported by community prayer, our project, our reflections, and celebrations of

the Eucharist and Reconciliation. We always try to receive missionaries, the poor, and those closest to us. We seek to grow, day by day, through ongoing formation, so that we might be renewed in our ministry of evangelization.

### **Present challenges for MISEVI**

First, we need to strengthen and cultivate a deeper spirituality that has the following characteristics:

- Focused on the Word of God and rooted in the legacy of Saint Vincent de Paul;
- Incarnated in reality, attentive to the signs of the times, to the cries of poor, and to the needs of the Church;
- Practiced in personal and community prayer.

We must always question our activity and discern new ways of proclaiming the gospel to the poor while empowering them to be the subjects of their own promotion: *Our faith in Christ, who became poor, and was always close to the poor and the outcast, is the basis of our concern for the integral development of society's most neglected members (Evangelii Gaudium, # 186).*

Therefore, we need to revitalize our mission:

- By evangelizing with creativity and enthusiasm and allowing ourselves to be evangelized by the poor;
- By listening to the poor and promoting their role as protagonists in society and in the Church;
- By acting in union with the other branches of the Vincentian Family;
- By ministering with the poor for the transformation of structures;
- By rediscovering the joy and the challenge in evangelization and service.

We have to renew ourselves constantly through formation, as the MISEVI community, as well as individually: *Of course, all of us are called to mature in our work as evangelizers. We want to have better training, a deepening love and a clearer witness to the gospel (Evangelii Gaudium, # 121).*

We have to prepare ourselves to live out our vocation and mission, proposing formation programs that include:

- Social-cultural situations and their challenges;
- Bible, tradition, the Church's teaching, especially her social doctrine;
- Missiology;

- Vincentian identity, as specific to MISEVI;
- Belonging and communication.

*There has been a growing awareness of the identity and mission of the laity in the Church. We can count on many lay persons, although still not nearly enough, who have a deeply-rooted sense of community and great fidelity to the tasks of charity, catechesis and the celebration of the faith (Evangelii Gaudium # 102).*

We have to maintain a lifestyle that confirms us in our identity by:

- Actively and consciously participating in projects and initiatives of the various local Associations;
- Maintaining ourselves informed and interested in all that refers to the Association.

Finally, in order to reinforce our missionary identity we must be ever mindful that the missionary:

- Is a faithful follower of Jesus Christ, evangelizing the poor; has found true hope in him; is committed to building up the Kingdom; is inspired by the Holy Spirit in discerning the signs of the times, with eyes wide open in order to discover the needs of the poor;
- Lives in communion with the Church and celebrates the sacraments, at the service of a concrete reality;
- Lives in a MISEVI community.

We cannot leave aside an essential element of our Vincentian spirituality, namely, the important role of Mary, the faithful virgin, the first Christian. Mary is the Queen of the Missions and encourages us **to continue as servants who build up the kingdom**. May Mary, Queen of the Missions, accompany us and watch over us as we engage in the mission that has been entrusted to us by Jesus Christ.

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