

“Like the Mustard Seed” (Mt 13:31)

Viviane Vuadi Makuala

*Sisters of St Vincent de Paul
'Servants of the Poor' of Gijzegem*

0. Introduction

Christ, in his holy wisdom, had forewarned his listeners during the anointing at Bethany, that they would always have the poor with them and that they would always be with them and amongst them (Mk 14:7). In fact, the poor are always there and poverty haunts and bowls over people with hearts that are sensitive, generous and good. Poverty urges us to have regard for the victims of this phenomenon.

Today, as in other times, poverty both degrades and lessens the person, according to the understanding we have of it. Given that the crisis is widespread and general, it engenders new forms of poverty, in light of which it is important that we adapt our responses according to the needs, since you don't give mercury to someone who has a fever, nor aspirins to someone with a disease; for each illness there is its own cure and, therefore, this requires actions which are effective and adapted to each circumstance.

The bubbling up of new forms of poverty, allowed the Sisters of St Vincent de Paul 'Servants of the Poor of Gijzegem' to be open to the times and local needs and to adopt a new form of pastoral service called 'upstream pastoral,' with the purpose of gaining positive results in the concretisation and adaption of the Vincentian charism. This work of research began in a particular way after Vatican II.

Compassion towards the poor had struck the heart of Mme Elisabeth de Robiano who, after a number of attempts, succeeded in founding the congregation in a providential manner; with a small group of people (whom we will note later), from whom the expression 'like a mustard seed' sown in Belgium, at Gijzegem to be precise, which has produced an immense tree, whose branches reach into Latin America (Brazil) since 1896, following the call of Pope Leo XIII, and into Africa since 1930, thanks to the fathers of the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (Scheutist Fathers), who felt the importance of the presence of sisters for training young women. In order to show the development, the path of development of the Congregation, we will recount succinctly the birth of this religious family, the Congregation of the Sisters of St Vincent de Paul 'Servants of the Poor of Gijzegem.'

1. The Context

Didn't St Vincent de Paul himself says that God's works have their moment? His providence is revealed in its own time and neither earlier nor later (Constitutions of the Sisters of St Vincent de Paul of Gijzegem, p. 5). Well, these words were fulfilled in the birth of the Sisters of St Vincent de Paul 'Servants of the Poor of Gijzegem,' for, after several attempts at starting, they initiated works of charity like: a hospital for the poor, a hospice for the elderly (Lutgardis Pirson, p. 97). The crowning of the works of Mme de Robiano was the birth of the congregation, in a way that was unforeseen and providential.

In fact, the Congregation was born at the beginning of the 19th century, on 21 January 1818, one and a half centuries after the death of St Vincent de Paul, born into a politico-social context that is difficult to comprehend: the French Revolution and the wars of Napoleon. These had impoverished the country population of Flanders; and this awoke the compassion of an open-hearted and generous woman, Elizabeth de Robiano (1773-1864) and of her husband, Baron Charles Lecandèle, to undertake works in favour of the poor people of the countryside. Her boldness would not allow her to stand with lowered hands when faced with human suffering and, more specifically, the suffering of children; she took up the challenge, availing of the wise counsel of her confessor, Monseigneur Maurice de Broglie, Bishop of Gand at that time. He advised her to open a school for the poor children of the village.

Humble and simple, Elisabeth de Robiano, saw herself as powerless and little prepared for such a mission and asked help from a congregation of religious, the Sisters of Notre Dame ten Bunderen, of Moorslede, who granted her a sister, Sr Barbara Cool. She arrived at Gijzegem on 20 January, accompanied by a young woman of 17, and they found one other already engaged in this work. The school began on 21 January with four students chosen from among the poorest (Constitutions of the Congregation of the Sisters of St Vincent de Paul 'Servants of the Poor of Gijzegem,' p. 5, § 3)

Sr Barbara Cool and the two young women, who had taken the habit of novices, at first led their lives under the order of the Rule of the Congregation of the Sisters of Notre Dame ten Bunderen. This was the beginning of a passionate adventure, the birth of the Congregation of the Sisters of St Vincent de Paul 'Servants of the Poor of Gijzegem.'

The foundress had never had physical contact, either with St Vincent himself or with the Daughters of Charity, but she, aided in her humility by Fr Vincent Lemaitre SJ of Gand, chose for these first sisters the rule that St Vincent de Paul had given to the Daughters of Charity, adapting it to the specific objectives of the new mission. Since then, we have lived under the patronage of St Vincent de Paul and we walk

in his footsteps with much faith, courage and the conviction that the poor are our lords and masters.

The priority of this congregation and of the sisters is the service of the poor. Our charism is 'To honour Jesus Christ as the source and model of all charity by serving him spiritually and corporally in the person of the poor.'

Since the beginning and at each period in our history, we Sisters of St Vincent de Paul of Gijzegem, try to be attentive to the signs of the times, to evaluate the efficacy of our actions in favour of the poor, to see from whence we come, where we are and whither we are going. From all this, we make adjustments in the context of time and place according to the needs of the time.

2. From Spinhuis to the care of the sick

Spinhuis is the name given to the first little school, which was focussed on the spinning of linen, and on the basics of reading, writing, maths and religious education.

We note that the original and principal goal was the instruction of poor children and the sisters engaged in that, without neglecting the urgent needs, such as care of the elderly and of the sick in their homes and taking responsibility for orphans.

Each era has its own specific problems. While teaching was the principal activity, the cholera pandemic necessitated a new engagement for the sisters, working with the victims of this illness and, in order to do this, it necessitated a special agreement with the Superior and, from that, the care of the sick in hospitals became part of the charism of the Sisters of St Vincent de Paul 'Servants of the Poor of Gijzegem' (Lutgardis Pirson – *Elisabeth de Robiano, madame Lecandèle, baroness of Ghjsegem 1773-1864*, p. 153, § 2) This agreement marked the start of an extension and contextualisation of the charism, according to the needs of time and place. Sr Lutgardis Pirson notes that, at that time, there were sisters who were involved in home care and in the care of patients in specialised institutes.

With the missionary expansion into Brazil and Congo, the Congregation adapted its charism to the needs of the places in which the sisters were established, always giving a privileged place to sewing, in memory of the original little sewing school. The sisters took care of the sick, of orphans, of the elderly, in short of all those who needed care of any kind. There was no longer any taboo on any situation which required the response of the religious servants of the poor in the exercise of the charism towards the poor, who they affectionately call their sisters and brothers.

The years pass, following each other, but they are not always identical. Evaluation, which we have commented on above, leads us to ana-

lyse situations and to keep an eye on the signs of the times, in order to find adequate solutions to new forms of poverty. This leads us to undertake a short, if fairly exhaustive, analysis of the current situation in our different provinces and to show how the challenges we face today, while under the heritage of St Vincent de Paul, urge us towards systemic change.

3. Current challenges of poverty and systemic change

In a world where each one seeks his/her own autonomy and well-being, a world invaded by the various media, the challenges are enormous, because they reveal acts which require abnegation and a quite heroic courage. Yes, the crisis is general, poverty crosses borders, but we cannot forget to reaffirm that it is also permanent; from that, we recognise that it remains a constant reality since, as ever, poverty is to be met in all areas of human life, it never disappears, despite all the endeavours of humanitarian organisations; and Christ, as we have already mentioned, has said that the poor will be always amongst us.

We move now, in step-by-step fashion, to examine some of the causes which lead to poverty in our time, and we look at some systemic changes undertaken with regard to specific situations.

3.1. *Brief analysis of the situation*

As members of the Vincentian Family, we are confronted by new forms of poverty, which we must face.

Established in Europe (Belgium), in Latin America (Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay) and in Africa (Congo, South Africa and Cameroon), our mission encompasses very divergent realities of time and space, according to the lived experiences of the populations we meet, but, in a general manner, the foundational charism, is lived always in the same fundamental manner, even if its forms differ sometimes according to priorities and objectives. In effect, the situations which the Institute faces are above all: material poverty, illness, absent parents, illiteracy, age, drought, the usurpation of land by the rich, juvenile delinquency (the phenomenon of ‘street children’). We also witness, in some situations, as in Brazil, a sort of social segregation; that is to say, the poor are located in places where they are abandoned to their own devices. They are without shelter, children who live alone under a roof without parents, without the financial means for education. Here are some of the situations, among so many others, which call for concrete action on the part of the Congregation and the sisters.

3.2. Service of the Poor and Systemic Change

Before we look at the way in which change has affected the Congregation, we begin by noting certain challenges which mark the spirit of the sisters

- Internationality
- The creation of an international research team on the spirit of St Vincent de Paul and of Elisabeth de Robiano (EISVER)
- The creation of ‘communities of insertion’
- Resource work
- The formation of laypeople in the charism and spirituality (Elisabethan Family in Brazil and Friends of Elisabeth in Congo)
- Joint living with laypeople in a rest home
- Family ministry
- Education of poor children

We note that this list is not exhaustive since there are many other works which we cannot set out at this time, therefore we will focus only on the most significant.

In the life of the Congregation, we know that a great ‘systemic’ change happened following Vatican II, which led to the ‘separation’ of the General Government, which had been, in effect, the same as that of the Province of Belgium. Following that, the Government General became more international with the participation of sisters from the three continents on which the Congregation is present (Europe, America and Africa) with the purpose of promoting interculturality. Some ten years ago, in the same spirit and in a common search to deepen our awareness of the spirituality of the foundress and of St Vincent de Paul, an international team was set in place, ‘International Team for the Spirituality of St Vincent and Elisabeth de Robiano (EISVER).’

From the foundation of the Congregation, the apostolate to the poor was undertaken in a very precise way: to those who were hungry, food was given; to those who were naked, clothes were offered; orphanages were opened to house children who had lost parents. In most cases, the poor came to the sisters but, today, we no longer simply wait for the poor to come knocking at our doors, we also go out towards them. We set great store on ‘going towards.’ We go out to meet the poor in the places where they live. There exist, in our days, forms of poverty like the AIDS pandemic and other illnesses linked to the lack of good hygienic conditions, the phenomenon of ‘street children,’ those who are illiterate due to lack of financial means, those without land and the ecological problem, which is incontestably becoming a catastrophe. Here we exercise a ‘roots-up’ ministry, which involves eradicating pov-

erty at its roots, starting at the source, that is to say, seeking to eliminate the causes which lead to poverty, such as: teaching the basics of hygiene to children and their parents, making people aware of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases: all of which comes under ‘roots-up’ ministry.

With regard to the problem of orphans, an evaluation was made during the past years in order to find effective and adequate means of integrating these children into society, after they have returned to their families. In fact, children raised in orphanages resemble children without a family network; the children often do not adapt to the conditions in their new families, they do not always advance in their studies, but we should note that this phenomenon should not be generalised, because some of them will be marked out by their behaviour and their ‘docility.’ After studying and evaluating the situation, the children are no longer gathered in orphanages, but remain in their families or in foster-families, under the supervision of the sisters who, once or twice a week, meet with the students and their tutors for evaluation and, especially, to give them their weekly allowance and milk to nourish them, and all the other needs which they have.

In countries where children are abandoned after the death of their parents, that is where the children live alone in the house left by their parent (as is the case in South Africa), the religious, in collaboration with the Government of the country, offer a ‘subvention’ for the needs of the children, prepare meals every day for the children, visit them regularly in their families and watch over the state of repair of their homes.

In some cases, the children come to a ‘welcome-centre’ during their free time, that is to say, those who study in the afternoon come before noon to the centre in order to do their homework and be fed before going on to school; those who study in the morning come to the centre after school so that they don’t return home until later when they have done their homework and eaten a meal; and this change is producing good fruit (as seen in Brazil).

Those who are homeless are welcomed into the centres in order to take care of bodily needs (a bath), and to get what they need for the day, rather than being gathered together in a Hospice.

The sisters always look for solutions to problems. For street-children, a pastoral response has been organised at the family level, in order to take into account the responsibility of the parents for the children, to shelter and keep them under the family roof and to avoid delinquency. For those who have no work, centres for learning trades have sprung up in order to ensure a future for the young jobless. This is a ‘roots-up’ pastoral field.

The situation of illiterate children is dealt with by having the sisters teach them. Here, we might apply the old adage: ‘If you give me a fish,

I will still go hungry, but if you teach me to fish, I'll go catch fish myself.' The sisters pay the school costs and look after all the needs of the children in their studies and this work has borne admirable fruit.

The sisters have changed the way in which they choose the places where they will live and the location of their communities; they build the communities in poor places and work with the people: these are 'inserted' communities which are adapted to the life conditions of the poor and seek to resolve their specific problems such as, for example, lack of water, desertification, etc.

With regard to the problem of ecology, the sisters, though formerly not engaged with it, today stand side by side with those who work to safeguard the environment, in order to keep it healthy, and agitate for the protection of species and cleanness. They are committed, for example, never to toss away a sheet of paper, in order to keep things litter free.

During some public marches, the most courageous religious have marched with the people and sometimes at great risk to their lives. This also is a notable change.

With regard to ageing, collaboration with laypeople is a current reality in order to continue to keep the Vincentian charism alive by encouraging it among the lay. They share the charism and seek to make it known to those who don't yet know it. From this idea came the Elisabethan Family of Brazil and the Friends of Elisabeth de Robiano in Congo. The members of these two groups are lay people who want to live the spirituality of the sisters of St Vincent de Paul, while remaining 'in the world' and their enthusiasm bears fruit in the heart of the societies in which they live.

The prayer of the sick and aged sisters is also a form of apostolate. They pray for those who are still in the full flow of activity and also for the poor. They witness still to the consecrated life to those men and women who live with them in the rest home. This is a pastoral field of 'closeness,' since they share life with these laypeople.

4. Conclusion

We have sought to show, in this little piece, that the Congregation has followed in the footsteps of St Vincent de Paul and of Elisabeth de Robiano for almost two hundred years. But during that time, it has always tried to adapt its march in accordance with its means and the needs of the various populations to whom it is sent.

The courage of Mme de Robiano has always inspired the sisters and they try to remain attentive to the signs of the times, in order to adapt to the socio-political contexts of the moment.

The poor are always amongst us, but those who are committed to improving their lot are called to an adaptation of the means and meth-

ods according to time and place. This is what the Sisters of St Vincent try to do, despite their poverty.

Timely and effective intervention, in favour of the poor and especially in favour of children, remains a constant reality, but a ‘roots-up’ pastoral engagement and a pastoral stance of ‘proximity’ are prioritised and have been highlighted in these past years with the aim of getting at the root, at the source of the evils, which are the origin of poverty and, to put it another way, to eradicate the causes which lead to poverty.

To be close to the poor is a priority for the ‘inserted’ communities, in order to better share their lives and their suffering. It is a major challenge, since life conditions are often precarious, but love for the poor urges us on to sacrifice ourselves for their good and their well-being.

The challenges are enormous, but collaboration sometimes makes it possible to achieve unexpected goals. In the same way that the religious family came about by providence, abandonment to divine providence, allows us to go further in seeking solutions that support the well-being of the poor. “The Mission continues.”

Translator EUGENE CURRAN, C.M.