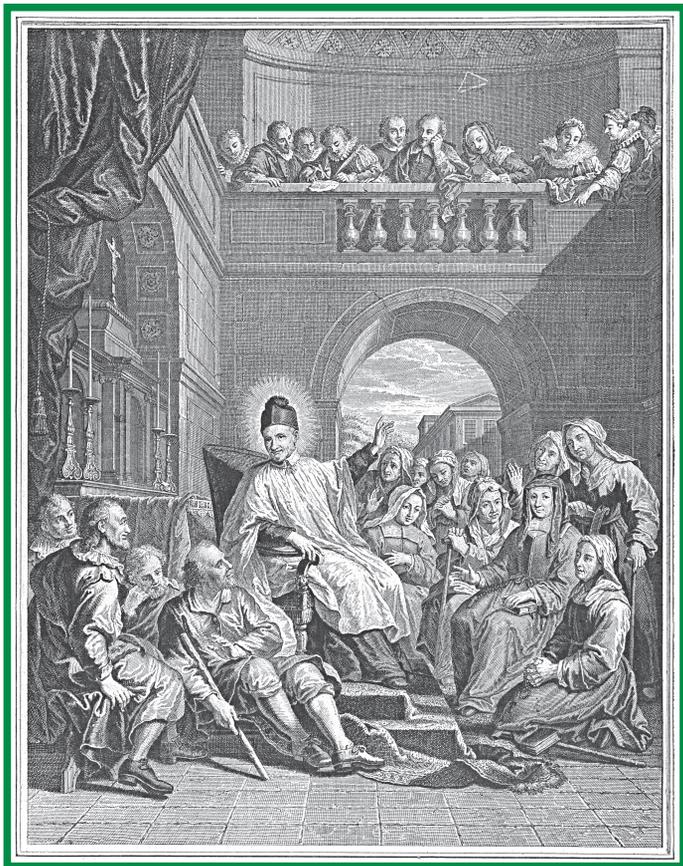


VINCENTIANA

59th Year - N. 4

October-December 2015



400 Years of Service to the Poor in the Vincentian Family

CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION
GENERAL CURIA

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INTRODUCTION

Note from the Editor

The publication of the Congregation of the Mission, *Vincentiana*, has as its objective the promotion and the spread of Vincentian spirituality, as well as reflection upon the Vincentian charism. Through the written word we attempt to make a contribution to the ongoing formation of the members of the Congregation of the Mission, the Company of the Daughters of Charity, and many men and women who are members of the various branches of the Vincentian Family,

This present issue, the fourth of the 59th year of our publication (October-December 2015), begins with information from the General Curia: two circular letters which present the matters that were discussed during the *Tempo Forte* of October and December and other letters written by the Superior General (*Vincentiana* is the Congregation's official means of communication with its members). More specifically those letters are: the letter that was published on the occasion of the Feast of Saint Vincent de Paul (September 27) and the letter that was published as a follow-up to the meeting of the Vincentian bishops (October 12). It seemed appropriate to include here a third letter (dated October 19) which contains information about the request for volunteers to serve in our International Missions. That letter is followed by the words of a Missionary who had committed his life to service in our missions and who died recently in the Solomon Islands. The final item in this section is the Advent Message of 2015. It could be said that our Superior General, Gregory Gay, is establishing a bond of communication with each and every missionary in the very place where they live and minister.

The Vincentian Family is preparing for the celebration of the 400th anniversary of the birth of that charism which throughout all these years has inspired the service of the various branches of the Vincentian Family, service on behalf of those men and women who are poor. In light of this reality the last issue of 2015 is intended to deepen our understanding of that reality and therefore, we have entitled this issue: ***400 Years of Service to the Poor in the Vincentian Family.***

In light of that celebration we requested some individuals from the various branches to share their reflections on the manner in which their specific branch has lived and adapted the charism in recent years. The authors have highlighted certain significant elements and challenges that they must confront if the heritage of the Vincent de Paul is to continue to be relevant in today's world.

The reflections of these individuals are both enriching and valuable. We begin with the reflections of a member of the AIC (The International Association of Charities), the first foundation of Vincent de Paul (1617)

giving as a precious summary: *Everything began 400 years ago in Châtillon*. That is followed by a reflection on the Congregation of the Mission, *Seasoned Fruits of Charity*, which highlights the missionary activity of the members throughout the world, an activity that began in 1625 (the time of its foundation). The reflection on the Daughters of Charity on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of the birth of the Vincentian charism, continues the theme of the reflection that was begun by the volunteers/members of the Confraternity of Charity and that led to the establishment of the Daughters of Charity, a treasure for the Church.

Members of the various lay groups that were established after the death of Saint Vicente de Paul (the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, the Vincentian Marian Youth Association, The Miraculous Medal Association and MISEVI) have also shared with us their reflections on the Vincentian charism.

Reflections on the Vincentian charim have also been shared with us by some of the non-traditional branches of the Vincentian Family. This issue includes the thoughts of members of other Religious Congregations that have been inspired by the Vincentian Charism. More specifically, this issue has been enriched by the reflections of the members of the Brothers of Our Lady, Mother of Mercy who were founded by Rev. Joannes Zwijsen, a pastor in Tilburg, Holland (1844) and by members of the Sisters of Saint Vincent de Paul, Servants of the Poor of Gijzegem (founded in 1818 by Elizabeth de Robiano: the Sisters were given the Rule that Vincent de Paul gave to the Daughters of Charity, but the Rule was adapted to the specific objectives of their mission). This section concludes with reflections from a member of the Federation of Vincentian Congregations (origins in Strasbourg. This group was established in the 18th century when the Bishop of Strasbourg, Cardinal Amand Gaston de Rohan, took the initiative and sent forth some young women with the intention of establishing a Congregation of Women to serve the poor and the infirm; thus the Sisters of Charity of Strasbourg were founded). There are countless Congregations that are part of this magnificent heritage that has been passed on to us by Vincent de Paul and many pages could be written about the men and women who share in this Vincentian charism.

We cannot ignore the interesting article, with a familiar ring, written by the Assistant General, entitled, "An Horizon of Creative Fidelity." This issue of *Vincentiana* also includes a "Spotlight Interview" about Bishop Vicente Zico, Brazilian Bishop of the Congregation of the Mission at the service of the poor and the Congregation itself until the day of his death.

We hope that the reflections in the October-December issue of *Vincentiana* will enable all our readers to deepen their understanding of the Vincentian charism.

ÁLVARO MAURICIO FERNÁNDEZ M., C.M.
Director of Vincentiana

FROM THE GENERAL CURIA

Tempo Forte Circular

5-9 October 2015

*What we have seen and heard we
proclaim now to you (1Jn 1:3).*

Dear Confreres,

May the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ fill your hearts now and forever!

We gathered for our *Tempo Forte* Meeting from 5-9 October. On the 10th, the General Council had a special session in which we dealt with the future of evangelization in Europe, especially Western Europe. During our *Tempo Forte*, we had reports given by the Director of the Vincentian Solidarity Office, Father Miles Heinen, and also the Director of Communication, Father Jorge Rodríguez.

A. Updates concerning our international Congregation

1. Meeting of the Vincentian Bishops held in June, the first of its kind. The evaluation of the event was substantially positive. It was clear that a good number of the bishops present desired maintaining contact with the Congregation of the Mission and receiving, through this event, the opportunity for ongoing formation as Vincentian bishops. The General Council made the following recommendations: that we continue an event like this once in each administration, that is, every six years, and that it be for a period of four days. We are hoping that the next event may be held in Paris in 2017 and the CIF team may be able to put together a program of approximately four days for visiting the Vincentian places, while also animating the bishops with Vincentian formation. All the bishops of the Congregation and all the Visitors, as well as confreres of the Congregation will be sent a letter to indicate the different aspects of this event.

2. Meeting of Superiors of International and National Missions, which also was the first of its kind and a great success. All but one of the international missions had a superior present and a good number of our mission superiors from different provinces or regions of provinces was also present. The international missions are considered by the General Council to be one of the most significant ministries of the Congregation, allowing us to live faithfully the charism we have been

given by Saint Vincent de Paul. For that reason, the international missions need greater attention in terms of both long-range and short-range preparation of missionaries. One of the challenges we face in the international missions is precisely the strong sense of provincialism, whereby it is difficult for confreres to see beyond the boundaries of their own provinces and their needs, rather than helping to deepen within each member of the province a missionary spirit with the possibility of going out. We had a lengthy reflection about the Mission Appeal Letter, which the Superior General writes every October. Rather than making it sound as if we are asking for volunteers, we want to be more proactive in encouraging confreres to live out their missionary spirit by accepting possible assignments to our international missions. This will be a theme that we will discuss in our 2016 General Assembly. We recommended that the next administration continue this experience and organize at least one gathering in the six-year period. At the same time, we will see if CIF can offer on a regular basis, perhaps every two years, formation for those in mission.

3. Preparation for the New Visitors' Meeting 10-20 January 2016.

4. Continuing preparation for our 2016 General Assembly. To date we have received only 20 of the reports that are to be sent in by all the provinces and vice-provinces in preparation for the General Assembly.

5. Reconfiguration. Among the different situations, we spent a good deal of time speaking about the Region of Albania, which will soon become the responsibility of the newly formed Province of Italy. We consider it to be a priority for the new province to reinforce the efforts of evangelization and formation in this region. The three Provinces of Spain that are involved in reconfiguration have chosen a date, which will be 25 January 2017. The provincialate will be in Madrid, in the house that is the property of the Province of Salamanca. As you may know, the Province of Italy and the new Province of France both will be formed and inaugurated on 25 January 2016, prior to our General Assembly. Then on 7 February, the Region of Cameroon, under the responsibility of the Province of Paris, will become a Vice-Province. The Superior General and/or his Assistants will be present at these different events.

6. The Privileges of the Congregation of the Mission, a text that our Procurator General, Father Shijo, has put together based on the previous materials prepared. He and the Vicar General will be procuring the publication of a text that will be available to all the members of the Congregation of the Mission.

B. The General Curia

1. Personnel. We discussed the ongoing question of how to respond to not having a superior in the house. The Superior General has appointed, as the animator of the community, Father Stanislav Zontak, in support of the Assistant Superior, Father Agus Heru. Father Agus will continue to carry out the details of being Assistant Superior and Father Zontak will be his principal support person, along with the collaboration of all the members of the General Curia in helping us to live a more harmonious community life.

2. A report from the **Director of the Office of Communications**, Father Jorge Rodríguez, who has developed a project, with the assistance of Father John Freund, entitled, C.M. Communications. The intention is to help promote greater networking and collaboration among the different institutions of the Congregation. That would be SIEV, CIF, the Vincentian Family Office for its different projects, such as systemic change, etc. The Office of Communications is also at the disposition of the provinces in order to help them make better use of means of communication. The Director also will prepare a guideline for the members of the Curia, helping us to improve our in-house communication process. All information received from the Vincentian Family and the Congregation of the Mission throughout the world, by way of bulletins, magazines, etc., will be channeled through the Director of Communications for his review. He will also prepare an organogram that will help to visualize the relationship of the different offices of the Congregation of the Mission together with the various commissions of the Vincentian Family.

3. The week before *Tempo Forte*, the nine members of **SIEV** gathered here for their annual meeting, together with Father Javier Álvarez and Father Agus Heru of the house. While here, they presented different articles, which were later discussed among themselves and will be published on the CMGlobal website, as well as in a book. There was also a discussion on a possible two-year Masters program in Vincentian Studies, hopefully with the help of one of our universities. This project would be carried out online. The SIEV team hopes that this would help encourage the development of our Vincentian experts, both of the Congregation of the Mission, as well as other branches of the Vincentian Family. They also discussed their relationship with other institutions of the Congregation of the Mission and/or the Vincentian Family with the hope of strengthening those ties. The SIEV team would also like to develop a working relationship with the Conference of Vincentian University Presidents. They recommended the development of a program for the archivists of the Congregation of the Mission. This recommendation will be passed on to the next administration of the Congregation.

4. A report from the **Director of the Vincentian Solidarity Office (VSO)**. Miles Heinen and the Superior General reported on a visit they made to one of the agencies that is very supportive of our works among the poor, especially in projects related to systemic change. There is hope that the funds of the VSO will continue to be replenished in 2017 for the new administration. Thus, a letter will be prepared for 2016, asking the participation of a number of the provinces of the Congregation in this project of giving a certain amount of money over the next five years to help continue the operation of the VSO.

5. We had a discussion concerning our relationship with the **Franz Foundation** and in preparation for our meeting with its president during our December *Tempo Forte*.

6. **United Nations Representative**. We received a final report from Father Joseph Foley, the outgoing representative, as well as a vision-mission report from the incoming representative, Father Guillermo Campuzano.

7. Father Claudio Santangelo presented two reports, one dealing with our **Project for the Expansion of the Congregation into Muslim Countries**, a project that will be presented at the 2016 General Assembly and another giving us an update on the **Working Group on Interreligious Dialog**, which will have its first meeting in the General Curia at the end of our *Tempo Forte* Meeting in December.

C. Economic questions

We received a report from the Treasurer General and we also discussed possible candidates to assist him in carrying out his responsibilities. We likewise suggested the names of candidates who might, eventually, replace the present Treasurer General, when his term is finished. Regarding the house on our property, the Casa della Nocetta, we have made the decision to rent it at a very low cost to a group of Sisters from Brazil, who are beginning their Congregation and operation, a group known to a number of members of our Congregation in Brazil.

D. International Missions

1. We received a report and evaluation of our mission in **El Alto, Bolivia**, after twenty years of presence of the Congregation of the Mission. The situation in El Alto, as many know, is complex, but there is good dynamism in the carrying out of the mission and great missionary zeal on the part of the three confreres present. Our desire is to continue this mission with the further support of other missionaries,

especially from Latin America, but also other members of the worldwide Congregation. With regard to the International Mission of **Cochabamba**, we reappointed the superior, after having consulted the members of the house. Therefore, Father David Paniagua was confirmed for another three-year period, concluding his role as superior in 2018.

2. The International Mission of **Papua New Guinea**. We had to make the painful decision to ask the missionaries of PNG not to continue recruiting candidates for the Congregation of the Mission until we have a province of the Congregation that is able to accompany them in this formation process. How to resolve this matter will be entrusted to the members of the APVC. We also considered a request from the former superior of the mission in PNG, Father Vladimir Małota, a request for financial assistance to the mission in Wiotape because of hunger, as a result of the famine that has affected the area. That request has been accepted and contact is being made as to how to channel money to the mission.

3. A report from the Assistant General for PNG and the **Solomon Islands** after his most recent visits there; at present the situation in the Solomon Islands is looking brighter than it had been. We now have one confrere who has reported to the mission and two who are waiting to arrive. Two of the confreres are from India and one is from the Province of Indonesia. As has been previously mentioned, there will be a number of confreres from this mission departing at year's end. One of the former members of the Solomon Islands, Father Teclémicael from the Province of Saint Justin De Jacobis, is presently taking a year's course in spirituality and formation here in Rome and then will be reporting to the seminary for which we are responsible in Papua New Guinea.

4. We studied the report from the Assistant General for the International Mission of **Angola**, as well as the Community Project and their Pastoral Plan. Both of these were approved. Presently there are three confreres on the mission and they are doing a good job at firming up our presence with the wonderful support of the Daughters of Charity and in collaboration with other branches of the Vincentian Family. They too are beginning to attract vocations and we have asked that, for the time being, they provide for the accompaniment of these young men up to and including philosophy. We will investigate with other provinces the possibility of who can assume the responsibility for the formation of these young men.

5. We studied a request from the superior of the mission of **Tunisia** and also discussed the matter of other missionaries for this mission in northern Africa.

6. We received an updated report from the superior of the new mission in **Alaska**, Father Andrew Bellisario, with the presence of three confreres and a fourth one soon to be expected when the visa process for entering the United States is completed.

7. We talked about **missions in general**, reviewing the requests we have received from different confreres from around the world who desire to be part of the international missions, as well as requests that we have received from bishops. We received seven requests from missionaries desiring to participate in one of the international missions or missions/provinces in need. Our hope is that six of these will be released from their provinces of origin in order to exercise this missionary role in our international missions. The problems of communication, documentation for visas, etc. are some of the things that delay integration into the missions. All that calls for great patience. The Superior General received a visit, and later a written request, from the Bishop of Tunisia for further accompaniment of the Congregation of the Mission in his diocese in a very multicultural situation. This request will be presented for the consideration of the confreres of the Congregation of the Mission in the upcoming October Mission Appeal Letter. Because of its new format, it may not be in the hands of the missionaries until the latter part of this month. The hope is that each missionary will have an opportunity to review and discern how the Lord might be calling him to serve in the best possible way. As Pope Francis says: to go out to bring the Good News in a joyful way to those in need of God.

E. The Vincentian Family

1. We received some information from the new **Director of the Vincentian Family Office** in Philadelphia, Father Joseph Agostino, as well as a response to a request made by the Superior General to the Visitor of the Eastern USA Province. He has most generously approved of receiving, for the Vincentian Family Office, a new permanent member, as of January 2016, Father Flavio Pereira. He is already in Philadelphia, studying English and becoming accustomed to the office. He comes from the Province of Central America, which has generously offered the international Congregation his services for the Vincentian Family Office. He will be working with Joe Agostino. Besides covering Flavio's room and board, the Eastern Province has also generously offered start-up money for the Vincentian Family Office until the directors can begin to solicit funds from the rest of the Vincentian Family who, under the auspices of the Vincentian Family Executive Committee, is responsible for this newly developed office. The office is behind the provincial house of St. Vincent's Seminary, in the same building with the Archives of the Eastern Province, the Vincentian Solidarity Office, and the office of the former Superior General, Father Robert

Maloney, where he carries out a number of different operations for the Daughters of Charity and the Congregation of the Mission. We are thankful for the generosity of the Eastern Province in providing these services and this opportunity for the development of our relationship with the Vincentian Family throughout the world.

2. A report from the **Coordinator of the Systemic Change Commission**, Father Giuseppe Turati, Secretary General of the Congregation; they are in search of a representative for the commission from the area of Africa. We have made some recommendations and those contacts are being made. Further requests may go out to other branches of the Vincentian Family to help fill this most important position for the Systemic Change Commission.

F. The Conferences of Visitors

1. Under **APVC**, we discussed a draft regarding its relationship with the International Mission of the Solomon Islands. In addition, a request is being made of its members as to who will be responsible for the formation of the candidates of Papua New Guinea.

2. With regard to **CEVIM**, the Conference of Visitors in Europe and the Middle East, Father Stanislav Zontak gave us a report on the ongoing formation program that will be held in Italy after Easter week. CEVIM has also been asked to study how best to respond to the urgent need of migrants in Italy and, hopefully, in other parts of Europe.

3. Father Eli Chavez gave us a report on the conference of provinces of **CLAPVI**. He participated in a workshop for young confreres that was held in Santo Domingo with the theme of “A Sense of Belonging.” Unfortunately, a number of provinces did not participate. We also made a request of CLAPVI to consider taking on a new mission, which, hopefully, it will be able to do as a way of celebrating the 400th anniversary of the inspirational founding of the Congregation of the Mission.

4. Regarding **COVIAM**, it has begun the common formation program, that is, the theologate in Nigeria. But because of many difficulties with getting visas, etc., only a small percentage of the possible candidates have begun this process thus far. The regular program for the Formation of Formators, which was to be held in Cameroon, is not going to happen because of a lack of available participants.

G. Updating of our calendars

1. We began with a discussion of **calendars for the next three months**, but I will only insert here the information regarding the Superior General. From 14-16 October, the Superior General will be in Paris,

partly for the CIF program and partly for a commitment with the Province of Paris. From 18 October to 18 November, he will carry out the canonical visitation in the Province of Mexico. From 19-21 November, he will visit the new mission of the Daughters of Charity in the country of Belize. From 25-27 November, he will participate in the Union of Superiors General Meeting in Rome. From 27-29 November, the Superior General will be in Seville, Spain for the reconfiguration of the Province of Southern Spain with that of North Africa of the Daughters of Charity. He also will visit the mission of the Daughters of Charity in Morocco from 30 November to 2 December. From 16-22 December, he will visit Venezuela. From 27-29 December, he will visit the Daughters of Charity and confreres in Belgium and then travel to Paris for the celebration of the New Year with the Daughters of Charity at the Rue du Bac.

2. With regard to the calendar for the remaining **canonical visitations** for the Congregation of the Mission, the Superior General will have one more canonical visitation, that of the Province of Mexico. Father Javier Álvarez still has to visit Puerto Rico, which will be in October and November 2015, and the Province of Rio in March 2016. Father Stanislav Zontak will visit the New England Province of the United States in October and November of 2015. Father Zeracristos Yosief will visit the Province of North India in January 2016. Father Eli Chavez will visit the Province of Madrid in October and November 2015 and the Province of Saragossa in March 2016.

3. For the **visits of the International Missions**, the Superior General will visit the Solomon Islands during Holy Week 2016 and Papua New Guinea in Easter Week 2016. The Superior General will visit the International Mission of Angola in April 2016 and that of Tunis in May 2016.

“Proclaim the gospel to every creature”

(Mk 16:15)

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General

Tempo Forte Circular

7-12 December 2015

“Let us allow ourselves to be renewed by the missionary vitality of our Vincentian vocation.”

(Motto of the 2016 General Assembly)

Dear Confreres,

May the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ fill your hearts now and forever!

We began our *Tempo Forte* with an ongoing formation session, on Sunday, 6 December, together with our Vincentian priest-students here in Rome and the Preparatory Commission for the General Assembly. We had 14 priest-students present, in addition to the members of the General Curia. The theme was the overall thrust for the 2016 General Assembly, with the main focus being the new evangelization in light of our 400th anniversary of Charism.

The Preparatory Commission was with us the entire week, working hard at getting things in order for the General Assembly. We also had the Working Group on Interreligious Dialog present. Its members gave a summary of their meeting to all of us on the last day of our meeting, 12 December. The other activities are as follows:

A. Updates on activities in the Congregation of the Mission

1. Remote Preparation for the New Visitors' Meeting 10-20 January 2016, here in Rome. We worked out the definitive program and looked at the list of participants. We will be expecting a fairly large group of new Visitors for this period, some 17 or so.

2. Continuing preparation for our 2016 General Assembly. The Preparatory Commission made a summary of all the material that had been sent in by a good number of the provinces. Nonetheless, unfortunately, as usual, there was also a large number of provinces, which did not send in any material. This makes it difficult not only for the remote preparation for the General Assembly, but also for the unfolding of the General Assembly itself. Hopefully we will be better prepared as the date approaches. We recommended that there be just one major theme for the General Assembly; that is, the Vincentian charism and new evangelization and that that theme be developed under other subdivisions, such as solidarity, collaboration, multiculturalism, universal-

ity, and missionary vitality. Our desire is that the atmosphere of the General Assembly be one of deep reflection and sharing, so that the outcome will be concrete lines of action for the different parts of the world where the Congregation is located. Other technical matters were considered, including an update on the costs presented by the Treasurer General and how to distribute the payment of the various expenses.

3. Reconfiguration. We discussed the continuing advancement of the process of reconfiguration between the Province of New England and the Eastern Province of the United States, as well as an update on the reconfiguration being considered in CLAPVI-South, particularly between Chile and Argentina.

B. Different Themes

1. We studied an invitation received from the **Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life**. We have asked different members of the General Curia, as well as our priest-students here in Rome and confreres from Italy, to participate in the event that will be held in February for young religious members of congregations of Consecrated Life.

2. We had a session with Fathers Harrie Jaspers and Leo Moues from the **House of Panningen**, the new house which forms part of the General Curia. Father Harrie is the superior. He and Leo gave us an update on the adjustment that is happening in the once Province of Holland and now the Mission House of Panningen under the General Curia. They are undergoing a major restructuring of the house in order to fulfill all civil requirements and state laws. The house will be open to the elderly and infirm confreres, as well as Daughters of Charity and other persons from religious life, who need housing and particular care. The House of Panningen also has a very nice program to help continue the Vincentian charism, called a Center of Vincentian Spirituality, in our former house of Nijmegen. It is being staffed by a confrere and also the former Superior General of the Brothers of Our Lady, Mother of Mercy, Brother Bruder, as a project of inter-Congregational collaboration in the Vincentian Family.

C. The General Curia

1. Personnel. We are continuing to search for an Assistant Treasurer General to work together with Father Joseph Geders.

2. From the **Director of the Office of Communications**, we received and studied a list of criteria for the presentation of information in our various means of communication for the Congregation. We are doing a study of how to reduce the costs of *Vincentiana's* publication, lessening the financial burden on the provinces.

3. We discussed **SIEV** and the ongoing development of a Masters in Vincentian Studies online, working with the possible collaboration of DePaul University. The project's next step is to work out the details with the experts at DePaul University regarding online studies.

4. We received a report from the **Director of the Vincentian Solidarity Office (VSO)**. It is notable that the VSO continues to be a great source of financial backing for a number of projects in the developing provinces. We have had to continue the suspension of the micro projects because of a lack of donations.

5. **United Nations Representative.** We received a full report from the new representative to the United Nations, Father Guillermo Campuzano. He indicated that he will attempt to move our status at the UN to a more fully participative level called ECOSOC. Father Campuzano will be contacting the Visitors of various provinces to find out more information regarding their legal status within their country. This information will help him receive this standing within the United Nations, giving him the possibility of having greater input in the decision-making processes.

6. We received a report from the entire team of the **Working Group on Interreligious Dialog**, led by Father Claudio Santangelo from Rome, along with Fathers Charles Pan from Taiwan, Francisus Xaverius Eko Armada from Indonesia, Mathew Nayak from North India, and Narcisse Djerambete from the future Vice-Province of Cameroon, working as a missionary in Tunis and also serving as Secretary for COVIAM. They presented their project for the year, focusing on publications for raising the awareness of confreres and members of the Vincentian Family regarding matters of interreligious dialog. They have a website (www.vindialogue.org), which will be updated regularly. They hope to be able to continue projects of collaboration, as well as making presentations to various groups of the Vincentian Family, especially in light of the delicate and volatile world situation in which we live, regarding what our attitudes should be as Christians toward those of other religious faiths, especially, at this time, Muslims. They have other ideas, besides publications, such as participating in workshops to promote greater understanding of interreligious dialog, etc. The members of the Working Group are very enthusiastic in what they are doing and we have great hopes for having our consciences raised further in terms of how we should promote, and live more fully, interreligious dialog.

7. We received an updated report from Father Claudio Santangelo on the investigation that he is undertaking regarding a **Project for the Expansion of the Congregation into Muslim Countries**. He spoke about his visit with the Superior General to Morocco and his upcoming

visit to Mauritania. He also already visited the country of Tunisia in northern Africa.

8. The Superior General gave an update on the most recent meeting of the **Union of Superiors General**, which focused on the participation of members of the Union of Superiors General and others in the most recent Synod on the Family. In that same line, Father Shijo represented the Superior General at a **General Assembly of Solidarity with Southern Sudan**, at which a strategic plan for 2016-2020 was presented with the hope of carrying out a transition process with the local Church and in collaboration with local Congregations present in South Sudan.

9. We received a report from our main English translator, Father Charles Plock, indicating the different ways he has supported not only the Congregation, but the Vincentian Family in his **ministry of translation**. To say the least, he and other persons have a great spirit of collaboration with the Congregation in terms of translation, which has saved the Congregation a great deal of money and we are grateful for their contributions. Among the other of our most faithful translators are Madame Raymonde Dubois, Father Antoine Douaihy, and Father Félix Álvarez.

D. Economic questions

We received a report from the Treasurer General regarding the expenses incurred at the meeting of the Superiors of our International Missions and Provincial Missions. We also previewed the budget for 2016, as well as those for the Vincentian Solidarity Office and the Website for 2016.

E. International Missions

1. We studied a report that we received from our three confreres in **Cochabamba, Bolivia**. There is a great possibility that we might be reducing that community from three missionaries to two missionaries.

2. We received a report and plan from the mission team in **Papua New Guinea**. At the present time there are seven confreres and they are expecting three more, who are preparing to arrive. The newly arrived missionaries are Joel Bernardo Yco from the Province of the Philippines, working in a cultural center; and Marcin Wróbel from Poland, who will be doing an orientation process. We also received a request for a director for a spiritual-year program from the Seminary of Saint Fidelis in Papua New Guinea. We were unable to respond positively to the rector's petition, but I ask here for anyone who may be interested in accompanying a group of seminarians who are in their

spiritual year, something that would be similar to our Internal Seminary, that is run in this particular diocese of Papua New Guinea.

3. We began by thanking all those involved, particularly the Visitor of Oceania, for the help and support they attempted to give us during the sickness that led to the death of our young rector and missionary of five years in the **Solomon Islands**, Raúl Castro. We began the process of consulting for a new superior for this international mission. The former superior, Father Jose Manjaly, left the mission as of 10 December, along with Father Varghese Ayyampilly, who also returned to his province of origin. We are grateful for their generous service and missionary spirit. We are also requesting from the community names for a possible candidate for rector that we can submit to the bishops responsible for Holy Name of Mary Seminary.

4. We reviewed an email we received from the mission superior in **Chad**, announcing the arrival of a new confrere, Father Sylvain Disuka from the Province of Congo. He will be working in the seminary of the diocese where our mission in Chad is established.

5. We received a report from the superior of our mission in **Punta Arenas, Chile**. They hope to secure a fourth missionary so that they can more adequately live and experience community, while responding well to the different pastoral responsibilities they have been given.

6. We studied a letter we received from the Archbishop of Anchorage, **Alaska**, in which he expressed his happiness with the work that the Vincentian team has undertaken thus far in this mission. It is predominantly dedicated to the Hispanics dispersed throughout the Archdiocese of Anchorage and even beyond, if requests come from other bishops. We also studied an evaluation that was done by the three present members of the mission, Deacon Arnold, Father Pedro, and Father Andrew Bellisario, the superior.

7. Missions and Candidates. We received offers from 12 candidates for our international missions. We hope to be able to place six of them immediately for our different missions.

8. Mission Requests. We received requests from three different places: the Diocese of Uvira in the Congo, the Apostolic Vicariate of Beni in Bolivia, and the Diocese of Alotau-Sideia in Papua New Guinea. Unable to respond directly to the requests of these bishops, we are asking the various conferences of Visitors and/or Provinces to study well the requests and, if possible, to try to respond to them. Each of the requests made are very suitable as Vincentian places, where much missionary presence is needed.

F. The Vincentian Family

1. We received a report from the **Coordinator of the Systemic Change Commission**, Father Giuseppe Turati. He presented their Strategic Plan for 2015-2018. Their need is to strengthen the presence of the systemic change process, particularly in Africa.

2. We also received a report about the collaboration that is happening among the different branches of the Vincentian Family that are present at the **United Nations**. They have a project that will be considered by the Vincentian Family Executive Committee when it meets in January 2016.

G. The Conferences of Visitors

1. The Asian-Pacific Visitors' Conference (**APVC**) informed us that there will be an ongoing formation meeting in May for confreres under five years of ordination. This will take place in the Province of South India.

2. From **CLAPVI**, we read a report regarding the four provinces of CLAPVI-South, evaluating the itinerant missionaries and their efforts over the past few years that this special project has been underway. It will now be temporarily suspended as they look for new ways of collaboration. Also, it was announced that there will be a program for formators of CLAPVI. That will be held in Bogotá. The Superior General, with the assistance of Father Eli Chaves, has written a letter to all the Visitors of Latin America, soliciting their participation in this most important event of formation of formators.

3. The President of **COVIAM**, Father Getahun Fanta, has terminated his mandate as Visitor and, therefore, as President. His responsibilities, at least temporarily, will be given to the Vice-Coordinator, who is the Visitor of Madagascar.

4. The National Conference of Visitors (**NCV**) of the United States has temporarily suspended its joint project of theology, as well as the Interprovincial Formation Committee. It is preparing for celebrations marking the 200th anniversary of the arrival of the Vincentians in the United States. The activities will take place around the time of the General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission and at other significant moments. The General Council discussed the future of the NCV, considering the fact that it might be reduced from three provinces to two. We will be soliciting, once again, from the current Visitors, possible solutions regarding mergers with other Conferences of Visitors.

H. Updating of our calendars

We looked at the calendars of each of the Assistants General and the Superior General, along that of the next canonical visitations, of which only three remain in three different parts of the world. We also reviewed our upcoming General Council meetings, as well as *Tempo Forte*. The calendar for the Superior General for the next three months is as follows. For the rest of December, Father Gregory will be in Venezuela from 16-22. After Christmas, he will be in Belgium, visiting the confreres and the Daughters of Charity. He will then have a brief visit to Paris to ring in the New Year with the confreres and, particularly, the Daughters of Charity. Following that is the International Council Meeting of Vincentian Marian Youth in Madrid, from 6-10 January. The New Visitors' Meeting in Rome is from 10-20 January. There is a Vincentian Family Executive Committee meeting on 22 January, followed by the formation for Vincentian Family leaders on 23-24 January. On 25 January, together with Father Giuseppe Turati, he will participate in the celebration for the new Province of Italy. The Vicar General, Father Javier Álvarez, along with Father Stanislav Zontak, will be participating in the inauguration of the new Province of France. At the end of January, the Superior General will have a meeting with the International Team of MISEVI in Madrid on 29-30. Then the Superior General will move to Paris to participate in the meeting of the New Directors of the Daughters of Charity, as well as accepting from the Superioress General the request for the renewal of vows. On 6-7 February, together with Father Stanislav Zontak, the Superior General will fly to Cameroon for the celebration of the inauguration of the new Vice-Province of Cameroon. Then from 10-11, he will be in Madrid, to participate in the meeting of the Councils of the Daughters of Charity of Spain. From 12-21, he will be in Ecuador, visiting the Congregation of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity, and the Vincentian Family. On the 22 and 23, he will be in Philadelphia for the meeting of the International Association of the Miraculous Medal. Following that is the next *Tempo Forte* Council Meeting.

“Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, as we begin the fourth centenary of our Vincentian charism, help us to bring the joy of the Gospel to the ends of the earth, so that no periphery will be deprived of your light, and the poor will again be in the center of the Church and of our lives” (from the “Prayer for the Time of Assemblies”).

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General

FROM THE SUPERIOR GENERAL

Letter Feast of Saint Vincent de Paul

Rome, September 27th, 2015
Feast of Saint Vincent de Paul

Dear Confreres,

May the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be with all of you!

On this feast of Saint Vincent de Paul I join with you in giving thanks to God for the blessing of serving God's beloved people, especially those men and women excluded from participation in society, those people living on the peripheries, our *lords and masters*. We are called to serve these men and women and to find Christ in them. We are continually exhorted to not only lend our voices to their causes, but also to listen to them and to speak for them. Hopefully, as a result of our identification with them, they invite us to be their friends (cf., Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, #198).

As we respond to this call to participate in the process of the New Evangelization, we, as Vincentians have a unique contribution to offer. First, during this Year of Collaboration we are presented with an opportunity to strengthen the bonds of cooperation and solidarity among the almost three hundred branches of the Vincentian Family. In places where those bonds might be weak or non-existent, we are challenged to explore ways in order to establish such bonds. Such collaboration is essential if we are to continue to give witness to the reality that we are all one People of God, one Vincentian Family.

Vincent de Paul often spoke about an affective and effective process of evangelization. Our effort to make greater collaboration a reality in our midst is the best means to insure a more affective and effective outreach to the forgotten members of society.

Furthermore, I believe we have another important contribution to offer the Church as we engage in the process of the New Evangelization. In recent years we have seen different branches of the Vincentian Family join together in order to change oppressive and unjust structures that prevent people from living in a dignified manner. Our involvement in these collaborative processes of systemic change enables us to be Vincentian missionary-disciples.

Let us continue to work together in creative processes of collaborative systemic change, remembering that the final word of hope belongs

to the Book of Revelation: *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; the former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more* (Revelation 21:1)... and may God bless us today and all the days of our life.

With the joy of having surpassed the goal of the Patrimony Fund Project still very much present, the Vincentian Solidarity Office is turning its face toward the present and future needs of the mission. The VSO suggests that the international collection taken up during the last two years continue. The collection is on its way to rooting itself as an expected tradition among the people we serve. The collection benefited the Patrimony Fund Project, and allowed for 25% of the collection to stay in the Province for the benefit of projects in the province. Now the collection, along with helping the province, can help the VSO reopen the Micro-Project program that allows an eligible Province, Vice-Province or mission to receive up to 5,000 USD in a relatively simple process to move forward a dream in service of the Evangelization of the poor. Please consider continuing the collection in service of solidarity with the mission of evangelization of the Congregation of the Mission. You will read about the projects in the Quarterly VSO Bulletin.

Your brother in Saint Vincent de Paul

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General

To the Visitors and the Missionaries of the Congregation of the Mission

Rome, October 12, 2015

May the power and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit be with you so that you might fulfill your episcopal mission

Dear Visitor,

From this city of Rome, I extend to you my heartfelt greeting, especially during this month of October when the Church asks us to support and to celebrate her involvement in the missions. At the same time you are also aware of the fact that the delegates at the Synod on the Family have just concluded their first week of deliberations. We hope that the discussions at this Synod will be helpful to the Church and also provide much hope to many families.

As you know, during the month of June (23-25) the First Encounter of Vincentian Bishops was held here in Rome. Most of the bishops were able to participate. During the October *Tempo Forte* we reflected on the evaluation which the Bishops offered to us. We were happy to know that they experienced much satisfaction with regard to that gathering: a fraternal environment, good content with regard to the material that was dealt with, well-planned liturgies, the overall condition of the house, the attentiveness of the Sisters, etc. At the same time we viewed in a very positive manner their great concern for the Congregation, their identification with our Vincentian spirit, as well as their desire to strengthen the bonds with the Congregation and to continue to deepen the living of their life in accord with our proper spirit.

Allow me, at this time, to present to you some proposals, suggestions or reflections which the Bishops offered during their meeting:

First, the juridical condition of the Vincentian Bishop: as long as the Bishop is the titular bishop of a Diocese, he lives in a house in said diocese, outside the community and the province. He has neither active nor passive voice but he continues to be a member of his province of origin.

A bishop emeritus can continue to live in the Diocese where he ministered or he can return to the community. If he opts to live in a community house, he immediately regains active and passive voice and enjoys the same rights and obligations as the other Missionaries.

Second, some Vincentian Bishops are willing to share their pastoral experiences with the members of their Province when they gather

together in a Provincial Assembly and are also willing to participate in a meeting of the provincial council (in both of these situations the Visitor must extend an invitation to do so).

Third, during the gathering it was suggested that the Bishops create a commission that would, among other things, organize future gatherings of the Vincentian Bishops. Unfortunately, there was not enough time for further reflection on this matter: How would this commission function? What would be the relationship of this commission with the Congregation? What would be the objectives of this commission? Etc.

Fourth, another suggestion was presented during the gathering: when the Superior General is given two proposals with regard to the establishment of an International Mission, one from a Diocesan Bishop and another from a Vincentian Bishop, it would seem logical and reasonable that priority would be given to the proposal of the Vincentian Bishop.

Fifth, with regard to the question: how frequently should there be a gathering of the Vincentian bishops?... There were many varied responses. The General Council has reflected on this matter and has decided that such encounters should be held once every six years (one meeting for each six-year period of the superior general). Nevertheless, given the fact that in 2017 we will celebrate the 400th anniversary of the origin of the Vincentian charism, the General Council has proposed that CIF organize a four-day meeting of the Vincentian Bishops in Paris where there would be an opportunity for reflection as well as for visiting some of the Vincentian historical places.

Know that you are in my prayer and I ask you to continue to pray for me,

Sincerely in St. Vincent,

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General

Mission Appeal Letter

Rome, October 19, 2015

To All the Members of the Congregation of the Mission

My Dear Confreres:

May the grace of the Lord be with us always.

During this month dedicated to the missions, I extend to each and every one of you my heartfelt greetings.

Before continuing to read this letter, I invite you to reflect on the following words of Saint Vincent:

Let's give ourselves to God, Messieurs, to go throughout the world to carry His holy Gospel and, wherever He may lead us, let's stand by our post and observe our practices until it's His good pleasure to withdraw us from it. We mustn't let difficulties shake us; the glory of the Eternal Father and the efficacy of the Word and Passion of his Son are at stake. The salvation of nations and our own is so great a good as to deserve to be won at any cost; it doesn't matter whether we die sooner or later, provided we die arms in hand; we'll be all the happier for it and the Company will be no poorer, "for sanguis martyrurum semen est Christianorum". For one Missioner who has given his life for the love of God, the goodness of God will raise up many others to do the good he will have left undone (CCD:XI:366).

During the month of October the Church traditionally asks us to pray for missionaries and to reflect on the missionary dimension of the Church. During the same month the Congregation calls upon the confreres to reinforce our international missions and other mission territories that are in need of assistance. At this critical moment in the Church's history, Christians are being persecuted in many different parts of the world. At the same time many significant ecclesial events have occurred: the visit of Pope Francis to Cuba and the United States where he spoke words that filled people with hope, the Synod of Bishops where the delegates are reflecting upon the important theme of the family.

Significant and important events have also occurred in the Congregation: confreres have been involved in Provincial Assemblies that are preparing the way for the General Assembly of 2016 and the process of reconfiguration is moving forward, especially in some of the European Provinces. Many parts of the world are calling upon the Mission-

aries to meet urgent needs and these cries challenge our apostolic and Vincentian generosity.

In this letter I also want to share with you an important activity that was planned by the General Curia during the year 2015, namely, the First Encounter of Superiors of the International and Provincial Missions. The gathering took place from September 14-18 (Rome). Representatives from the international missions, as well as provincial were present (the only exception was the Solomon Islands). During that time the participants shared their experiences, reflected on the theology of the mission and studied and reviewed the documents, *Ratio Missionis*, the Statutes of the International Missions and the *Practical Guide for the Local Superior*.

In light of Pope Francis' message for World Mission Day 2015 and in the context of the Encounter of the Superiors of the Missions, I want to share with you three thoughts. I share these thoughts in a special way with those Missionaries who might be motivated to respond to the missionary call this year.

[1] In his message the Pope refers to a reality that is very much related to our charism: *mission is part of the "grammar" of faith, something essential for those who listen to the voice of the Spirit who whispers "Come" and "Go forth". Those who follow Christ cannot fail to be missionaries, for they know that Jesus "walks with them, speaks to them, breathes with them. They sense Jesus alive with them in the midst of the missionary enterprise" (Evangelii Gaudium, #266)*. Our Constitutions state clearly that the purpose of the Congregation is to follow Jesus Christ evangelizing the poor. Therefore, a response to the missionary call is not simply the result of some sentimental desire but is part of our charism.

[2] In another part of his message the Pope reminds us: *there is an urgent need to reaffirm that the central ideal of mission is Jesus Christ, and that this ideal demands the total gift of oneself to the proclamation of the Gospel. On this point there can be no compromise: those who by God's grace accept the mission, are called to live the mission. For them, the proclamation of Christ in the many peripheries of the world becomes their way of following him, one which more than repays them for the many difficulties and sacrifices they make* (Message of Pope Francis for World Mission Day 2015). Those members of the Congregation who are called to live their missionary vocation in a radical manner must be willing to offer their lives to Jesus Christ and also willing to serve those who live in situations of poverty in the existential and geographical peripheries of our world.

[3] Finally, during the gathering of the superiors of our missions I was touched by the fact that the Missionaries are able to adapt to the reality of the place where they have been sent and where they are

ministering. They are able to do this despite the fact that many of those said realities have not previously been part of their own experience. At play here is not only the capacity to adapt to another situation but also an openness that enables one to respect and to value the culture of another (an openness that is revealed by a willingness to learn the local language and to assimilate the many other aspects of that new reality). I have seen this with my own eyes as I have visited various missions. In this regard the Pope states in his message: *Today, the Church's mission is faced by the challenge of meeting the needs of all people to return to their roots and to protect the values of their respective cultures* (Message of Pope Francis for World Mission Day 2015).

In the next part of my letter I want to present to you and remind you about some points that I have stated in previous years, matters that we must be very clear about: the reality and the needs of the missions, the criteria for the selection of the Missionaries, the steps that should be followed by the Missionaries wishing to volunteer for the missions and the manner in which you can contribute to the Vincentian Solidarity Fund.

This year it is the very Superiors of the International Mission who will speak and extend to you an invitation to engage in the missionary endeavor. Taking advantage of their presence in Rome during the gathering in September and with the assistance of the Communications Office, each one of these Missionaries has extended an invitation which you can view at (www.gospel-joy.org). There you will also find further information with regard to the theme, the various reports and documents relative to that meeting.

MISSIONARY REALITY AND NEEDS

AFRICA

- **Angola** - (2012). Local language and Portuguese. Parish ministry, accompany local communities and the Vincentian Family. Missionaries presently ministering there: Marcos Gumieiro, José Ramírez Martínez, and Jason Cristian Soto Herrera. They request the presence of more Missionaries in order to expand their missionary service.

- **Benin** - (2013). Local language and French. Pastoral ministry, assisting the Sisters of the Miraculous Medal and supporting the Vincentian Family. Missionaries presently ministering there: Stanislaw Deszez and Rafał Brukarczyk. A Missionary is preparing himself to go there but there is need for more Missionaries. This mission is supported primarily by the Province of Poland.

- **Chad** - (2012). Supported by COVIAM (the Conference of Visitors of Africa and Madagascar). Local language and French. Parish ministry and teaching in schools. Missionaries presently ministering there:

Roch Alexandre Ramilijaona, Onyekachi Sunday Ugwu, and Esigbemi Ambrose Umetietie. Very soon one of the Missionaries will be leaving and another Missionary arriving in order to serve the diocese. More support is needed.

- **Tunis** - (2011). Local languages, French and English. Parish ministry, charitable assistance through CARITAS and ministry with the Diocesan Office of Education. Missionaries presently ministering there: Firmin Mola Mbalo and Narcisse Djerambete Yotobumbeti. These Missionaries would like another confrere to join with them in their ministry.

New invitation to participate in this mission: in a recent letter the Bishop of Tunis told me: *The members of the parish in Sousse are retired people, expatriates, many tourists, and mixed families (Christian and Muslim). It would be important to minister in this parish in order to continue to build bridges and dialogue with the Muslim community on behalf of serving the poor in this country. The Church in Tunis is positioned on the peripheries: it is not self-sufficient and there is no seminary to train future priests. The priests have to come from outside the country. The faithful in Tunis are composed of about thirty thousand foreigners, university students, workers, and expatriates. The majority of the population is Muslim and, as a result, there is always an environment of suspicion and indifference; prejudices which we attempt to change through the witness of our life.*

AMERICA

- **Bolivia, El Alto** - (1994). Local language and Spanish. Pastoral ministry with the indigenous peoples which implies rural pastoral ministry and the formation of the laity. Missionaries presently ministering there: Aidan Rooney, Cyrille de la Barre De Nanteuil and Diego José Plá Aranda. They request the assistance of one more Missionary.

- **Bolivia, Cochabamba** - (2009). Local language and Spanish. Pastoral and parish ministry. The Missionaries presently ministering there: David Paniagua, Jorge Manrique Castro, and Luis Miguel Montaña Flores.

New Invitations: Missionaries are needed for a new mission in **Beni, Bolivia.**

Sister Mary Gerald, DC, who has ministered in Bolivia for more than fifty years, wrote me a letter and stated:

We are about to conclude three popular missions that were given by the Vincentian Missionaries and together with our bishop, we are extremely grateful and satisfied with their ministry. It is hoped that these missions will bring about even greater happenings. Two of the

four Missionaries stated that these were the most difficult popular missions that they had engaged in during the two years that they have ministered together as an itinerant missionary team. The people were very happy to receive the Missionaries and are praying that they will return. The people bade farewell to the Missionaries with tears. The Daughters of Charity, who minister here as a team, are at a critical moment...

I responded to Sister's letter and told her that the confreres are promoting this mission in Beni and that I also support the idea of a shared mission, among all the branches of the Vincentian Family, especially during this Year of Collaboration in the Vincentian Family.

- **Territorial Prelature of Tefé, Brazil:** The Prelature of Tefé, located in the heart of the Brazilian Amazon, had been entrusted to the Spiritans. Bishop Fernando Barbosa dos Santos, C.M., is the fourth bishop of Tefé and the first one who is not a member of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. The Prelature extends for some 264,669 square kilometers and has a population of about 237,782 inhabitants. There are 10 cities, about 405 riverside communities and 40 urban communities. There are 88 Indigenous communities in 15 different villages with a total population of 8,500 persons. It is a poor missionary territory that needs more priests and evangelizers. The primary means of transportation is by boats (long hours of travel in precarious and difficult conditions). The language is Portuguese and the local language.

- **Chile, Punta Arenas - Tierra del Fuego** (2013). The official language is Spanish. This mission would involve pastoral ministry in Punto Arenas. At the beginning of the present year we accepted the administration of a parish in Tierra del Fuego. The Missionaries presently ministering there are: Ángel Ignacio Garrido Santiago, Pablo Alexis Vargas Ruiz, and Margarito Martínez González. They request the support of one more Missionary.

- **Anchorage, Alaska** - (2014). Languages: English and Spanish. The confreres ministering there are serving an increasing number of Latinos who live in the Diocese of Anchorage. The Missionaries presently ministering there are: Andrew Bellisario, Arnoldo Hernández Rodríguez, Pedro Nel Delgado and they are awaiting the arrival of Jesús Gabriel Medina Claros.

ASIA

- **Solomon Islands** - (1993). Languages: English and Pidgin. The confreres are involved in formation ministry of candidates for the Congregation (major seminary) and rural parish ministry. The Missionaries presently ministering there are: Jose Manjaly, Raúl Eduardo Castro,

Gregory Cooney, Varghese Ayyampilly, and Antony Punnoth. In 2016 Ricardo Padrhan and Paulus Suparmono will begin ministry there. There is always a need for Missionaries to teach philosophy and/or theology.

• **Papua New Guinea** - (2003). Language: English and Pidgin. The mission there includes ministry in various dioceses. In addition to formation ministry in the seminary at Port Moresby, the confreres are involved in rural parish ministry and also work at the center of missionary cultural formation. The Missionaries presently ministering there are: Homero Marín, Marceliano Oabel, Emmanuel Lapaz, Jacek Tendej, Neil Lams and Joel Bernardo Yco. Justin Eke continues his ongoing formation.

Present needs:

In addition to the needs of the International Missions, we also need Missionaries who are willing to support our missionary provinces:

1. Province of China: The Province of China continues to provide for the pastoral needs of the people of Taiwan and mainland China. The language is Mandarin and the confreres are involved in a variety of ministries.

2. Vice-Province of Saints Cyril and Methodius: This Vice-Province has evolved with the support of missionaries from outside the province. The number of native missionaries is increasing. Charitable works have been established there in order to provide for the material and pastoral needs of the poor. With ministry in Ukraine, Russia and Belarus the Vice-Province is willing to accept confreres who are willing to minister there (either with long-term or short-term commitments). At the present time there are missionaries from Africa, India and in a short time a Missionary from Vietnam will arrive there. The language is Russian.

Urgent calls

3. Province of Cuba: Even though this Province is searching for a way to reconfigure itself with another province, there is a lack of personnel in that province. The language is Spanish and confreres will be welcomed to minister there (either with long-term or short-term commitments).

4. Vice-Province of Mozambique: The members of the Vice-Province have been involved in ministry with men and women who are in great need, in formation ministry in seminaries and in a mission in South Africa. The Vice-Province is still dependent on Missionaries from other provinces in order to continue its ministry. They are most willing

to accept new members. The language is Portuguese and the local language. There are 29 ministry positions but only 17 Missionaries.

Since I began this letter with a reflection on the words of Saint Vincent when he spoke about the missionary spirit, I would like to conclude this letter with some other words of our Founder referring to two Confreres, Nicolas Duperroy and Guillaume Desdames, missionaries in Poland:

What have they suffered in that country? Famine? It's there. The plague? Both of them have had it, and one of them has had it twice. War? They're in the midst of armies and have passed through the hands of enemy soldiers. In short, God has tried them by every form of scourge. And here we are, like homebodies without courage or zeal! We'll see others risking their lives in dangers for the service of God, and we'll behave like cowards! What a pity! What weakness! (CCD:XI:365).

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General

VOLUNTEERS FOR THE MISSIONS "AD GENTES"

Criteria for selection

The realities of missionary life are a challenge and almost always different from the challenges that we have to confront in our province of origin. Therefore, some criteria are needed in order to select the confreres who will minister in those places. Using the following criteria the volunteer will be interviewed by some member of the General Council or his representative.

1. *The Missionaries ought to have emotional stability.* Missionary work is difficult! The interpersonal relationships with one's companions in ministry, the cultural tensions and a certain anxiety with regard to ministry, all of these increase tension. Only those persons who are emotionally stable should make a long-term commitment for missions in a different cultural context.

In order to be effective, those confreres who minister in a culture that is distinct from their own must learn another language, attain knowledge with regard to the new culture(s) so that the message of God can be proclaimed in that different and changing world context.

2. *The Missionaries ought to have a spiritual maturity.* In order to preach the gospel in an effective manner, initiative and ability are not enough. Saint Paul tells us that we are *earthen vessels* and

we ought to reveal *the surpassing power* in our ministry that proceeds from God and not from us (2 Corinthians 4:7). The missions are a supernatural work that are engaged in through the power of God. Therefore, missionaries ought to be people who *kneel before the Father* (Ephesians 4:2) in prayer. They ought to be people who live the word, not only in order to prepare their homilies and lessons but also in order to reflect upon the will of God for their own life.

3. Mindful of the local reality, *Missionaries ought to possess those qualities and be formed in a manner* that enables them to build up the Church, to form new mature Christians, and to form Church and national leaders for Christian service. Those are the essential tasks of the mission. Missionaries must avoid the temptation of transferring the culture of their Church of origin to the Church of their new mission. Rather they should minister in a manner that enables the gospel values to become rooted in the culture of the place where they are ministering.

4. *The Missionaries ought to be properly motivated.* Missionaries ought to develop a clear and direct motivation for evangelization, for the mission and for service on behalf of those who are poor. They should always be mindful of the fact that their ministry is exercised for the greater glory of God. Doubtful motives such as personal gain or vain-glory always lead to failure in achieving the objective of the mission.

MISSION APPEAL LETTER 2015 THE FOLLOWING STEPS

Information for those who wish to offer their ministry as volunteers

[1] After a period of serious discernment, if you feel moved to volunteer for the missions, please send your letter or e-mail to Rome by **November 20, 2015** or again by **February 20, 2016** so that we can review requests at our *Tempo Forte* meetings in December and March.

[2] It is helpful to know the language beforehand, but it is not absolutely necessary. A period of cultural and language training will be provided for the missionaries.

[3] It is necessary that the Missionary should have reasonably good health and the flexibility needed for inculturation.

[4] Confreres who volunteer should inform the Visitor in their province that they have done so. Later, the superior general will then dialogue with the Visitor about the matter.

[5] Your letter should give some background knowledge about your person, your ministerial experience, your languages and your training.

It should also express any particular interests that you have, such as the mission in which you would like to take part.

[6] Even if you have already written in the past, please make contact again.

[7] If you cannot go to the missions we welcome your monetary contribution as a sign of your zeal for the missionary work of the Congregation. Every year many eligible provinces needing help seek a micro-project grant of \$5,000 or less from the Vincentian Solidarity Office. These grants are awarded by the VSO quickly and with minimal paperwork. The VSO reports on the wonderful results of these grants in its quarterly bulletin (see: www.cmglobal.org/vso).

HOW TO MAKE A CONTRIBUTION TO THE VINCENTIAN SOLIDARITY FUND

Contributions from individuals and provincial houses:

- Checks only and those checks should be made out to
Congregazione della Missione

The bank will not accept checks with any other name. Checks should be sent to

**Treasurer General
Congregazione della Missione
Via dei Capasso, 30
00164 Rome, Italy**

- Other possibilities for bank transfers can be discussed with the Treasurer General.
- Clearly indicate that the funds are for the Vincentian Solidarity Office (VSO).

In every case:

- All gifts received will be acknowledged (if your contribution is not acknowledged in a reasonable time, please contact us for clarification).
- Please inform us if you are making any transfer of money as described above.

Letter to the Missionaries

Rome, October 26, 2015

Dear Confreres,

May the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ fill your hearts today and always!

By means of this letter I want to share with you the news that on October 21, 2015, at 8:50am in the Honiara Hospital in the Solomon Islands, our confrere, RAÚL EDUARDO CASTRO VIDELA, C.M., departed for his mission in heaven.

Raúl was born on August 3, 1962, in Villa María (Province of Córdoba, Argentina) and admitted into the Congregation on March 19, 1984 (Province of Argentina), incorporated on December 3, 1988, and ordained a priest on June 3, 1990.

In November 1996, Father Raúl wrote to Father Maloney, superior general at that time, and volunteered for the international missions... *As a member of the Congregation of the Mission I am deeply grateful for the missionary vocation that you are promoting at this time.*

On April 15, 1997, Father Maloney responded to that letter. In May of the same year Father Raúl expressed a desire to serve in the missions in Africa and stated: *I am willing to go to the place that you believe to be most appropriate.* In August, Raúl expressed a desire to minister in Tanzania, but nevertheless, on October 8th Father Maloney proposed *going to the mission of Cuba or Mozambique, one of the poorest countries in the world.* On October 18th Father Raúl responded: *I prefer the mission in Mozambique.* Father arrived at the mission in March 1998. Then in July 2005 Raúl sent me a letter and spoke about his missionary experience: *since 1998 I have ministered here in Mozambique and have done so in some very distinct ways: evangelization in rural areas (1998-1999, 2005), formation of candidates for the Congregation (2000-2004)... I am seeing now that this stage of my life is coming to an end... I will leave Mozambique in December but only after I have fulfilled all my obligations. Let me bold and ask you to send me, if you believe it best, to another mission. Father Ubillús mentioned a possible place where I might be able to continue the mission, that is, Papua New Guinea, where there are few missionaries. I offer myself, however, as a volunteer to go to the place where you believe I might best contribute my humble service of collaboration.* In a letter dated March 24, 2006, Father Raúl wrote to me once again: *It has been some weeks now since I left Mozambique and at the present time I am relaxing here in Argentina. This has been a time of reflection and prayer and I request to remain in this Prov-*

ince for two years. After that I believe I will be in condition to rejoin the international missions.

On November 4th I received the following letter: *On the one hand I am a formator and on the other hand I am a member of the Provincial Council. Because of these commitments I cannot abide by the timeframe that I previously spoke about with you. Nevertheless the missionary spirit continues to stir in my heart and I want to take up those activities once I have fulfilled my present obligations. Both responsibilities will come to an end in December 2009.* On November 13th, 2009, Raúl sent me another letter: *with regard to the place for my next mission... even when I was in Mozambique I had expressed a desire to minister in Papua New Guinea... it is a mission that is lacking in personnel and according to the call that you extended in October the situation seems to be the same, that is, there is need for a missionary to engage in pastoral activities and not only to teach in the seminary. I am willing to exercise that missionary ministry with and for those brothers and sisters residing there.*

On March 15th, 2010, during our Tempo Forte we reflected on Raúl's offer to volunteer for the international missions. After consulting the members of the Council I decided to send Father Raúl to the Solomon Islands for a period of four years (after which his stay could be further renewed). I received a prompt response... on March 20th, 2010, Raúl wrote: *I have received your letter. Thank you for this new missionary assignment and I will try to arrive there as quickly as possible.*

Today, Father Raúl has departed from this earth and his Creator has welcomed him with open arms. Raúl was 53 years old, 31 years in vocation and 25 years a priest. He had been the rector at the Seminary of the Holy Name of Mary.

Funeral services will be celebrated on October 23rd at 10:00 am.

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General

A Path that Will Make us Effective Mediators of God's Promises



Rome, Advent 2015

My Dear Brothers and Sisters, Members of the Vincentian Family,

God's Promises

I will be your God and you will be my people! (Leviticus 26:12).

My love shall never leave you! (Isaiah 54:10).

I rescued the poor who cried out for help, the orphans, and the unassisted!
(Job 29:12).

Behold, I am doing something new... do you not perceive it? (Isaiah 43:19).

Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die! (John 11:26).

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood remain in me and I in them!
(John 6:56).

I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you (John 14:18).

Behold, I am with you always until the end of the age (Matthew 28:20).

Those biblical texts embody and express the covenant relationship that God established with humankind. All the promises that I have referenced above require a form of presence in order for those words to be fulfilled. Let me place before you some examples to explain what I mean.

When the people cried out against their oppressors who had enslaved them in Egypt [God was present, listening to their cries], God called Moses: *Come, now! I will send you to Pharaoh to lead my people out of Egypt* (Exodus 3:10) [God was present, initiating a solution to the situation]. After a bitter struggle Pharaoh relented and the people crossed

the Red Sea to begin their journey through the wasteland [God was present, saving the people]. When the people were hungry, God provided them with manna; when they were thirsty, water flowed from the rocks [God was present accompanying the people in their time of need]. Indeed, God became present in the midst of the people's struggles through Moses's leadership. Centuries later, when people gathered in another deserted place to listen to the teachings of the Master, they witnessed the multiplication of the loaves and the fish and their hunger was satisfied [God was present, this time physically in the person of Jesus, as teacher and healer and comforter]. The Master, however, desired to satisfy not only their physical hunger, but also their spiritual hunger: *I am the bread of life; those who come to me will never hunger and those who believe in me will never thirst* (John 6:35). The following words from the letter to the Hebrews sum up what I am attempting to say: *In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days he spoke to us through a son* (Hebrews 1:1-2).

What has any of this to do with the liturgical season of Advent? We, as Vincentians, are called to continue the mission of Jesus Christ by proclaiming the Good News to those people who are marginalized and living on the peripheries of society: *Yes, Our Lord asks us to evangelize the poor; that's what He did, and what He wants to continue to do through us.*¹ As we engage in this process of evangelization, we are preparing the way for the Lord and, at the same time, we become mediators who bring to fulfillment God's promises. Through our various ministries/services, we unite ourselves with John the Baptist's desire: *he must increase, but I must decrease* (John 3:30).

A Missionary Experience

Let me use one of my missionary experiences to illustrate this point. During my visit to the Province of Madagascar in 2011, at the time of its centennial celebration, our confrere, Father Anton Kerin, shared with me some of his experiences as he engaged in ministry in a very remote part of that country. He spoke about the joy that he experienced as he saw the ways in which the Good News of Jesus was becoming rooted in the people. Father also spoke about the difficulties that he encountered as he attempted to give witness to people who had never

¹ 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 XII, p. 71; 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:XII:71.

before heard the name of Jesus. I desired to see this mission for myself and so I promised Father Anton that I would visit him on a subsequent trip. It was not until April 2015 that I was able to fulfill that promise. In order to do so I had to travel for two days over some of the worst roads I have seen during my eleven years as superior general. Obviously, I was unable to travel this distance by myself since I had no familiarity with the roads. This meant, then, that others had to accompany me. In this specific instance, the Visitor, a layman, and Father Anton (who drove the last nine hours, the most difficult part of the trip) became my companions on the journey. When we finally arrived at our destination, Father Anton led us to the chapel where we were welcomed by local government and church officials. The next day I had the privilege to celebrate the Eucharist with the people of that community. It was Vocation Sunday and I preached my homily in English, which was then translated into Malagasy. I was also able to visit and celebrate the Eucharist at one of the newer missions, established some four years ago and now flourishing. Yes, I fulfilled my promise to Father Anton and, at the same time, I discovered that Father Anton and those who ministered with him were mediators in bringing to fulfillment the promises that God and our Founders had made to the people of Madagascar.

During this season of Advent, we recall the fact that God has been faithful to the promises that were made to our ancestors and that have been extended to us as the people of God living in the midst of the world during this year of 2015. As we reflect on those promises, we also realize that our cooperation is necessary for these promises to become reality. Therefore, I would like to reflect with you on my missionary experience in Madagascar and, hopefully, outline a path that will make us effective mediators of God's promises.

Collaboration

First, I, all alone and by myself, was unable to do what I had said I would do. In order to fulfill my promise I needed the help and the collaboration of many other people, namely, guides and drivers, who were familiar with the roads and who knew where we were going. Our Founders made a promise to *our lords and masters* that we would proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. No one of us, alone, can fulfill that promise. From the beginning, Vincent realized that he had to involve others in his ministry in order to be effective. Therefore, *after having seen proof of the virtue and ability of François de Coudray, Antoine Portail, and Jean de la Salle*, Vincent invited those individuals to join him in preaching popular missions (cf., CCD:XIIIa:222). Within a short period of time the Missionaries realized that they, too, needed collaborators since it became clear that *the poor suffer more from a lack of organization than from a lack of generosity* (cf., CCD:XIIIb:8) and so

the Confraternities of Charity came into existence. Later, during the 19th century, when Frédéric Ozanam founded the Vincent de Paul Society, he called upon one of the Daughters of Charity to advise and accompany the members of this newly formed group of university students: *Sister Rosalie [Rendu]... gave them invaluable advice, drew up for them a list of poor families to visit, furnished them with bread and meat tickets until such time as the Conference would be able to issue its own.*² During that same period of time, Catherine Labouré called upon Father Jean-Marie Aladel to collaborate in the establishment of a group of young men and women that today is known as the Vincentian Marian Youth Association.

Collaboration is fundamental to our being as Vincentians. No one alone can proclaim the Good News in an effective manner; no one alone can put in place the structures that will unite the world in a network of charity; no one alone and no one branch of the Vincentian Family possess the only path, or the privileged path, that enables its members to follow Jesus Christ, the evangelizer and the servant of the poor. When, however, we share our gifts and talents, when we join together in a common project, when “we” and “our” become more important than “me” and “mine,” then we, together in Christ and as Vincentians, can and do make a difference; then we, together in Christ and as Vincentians, make it possible for the promises of yesterday to be fulfilled today.

Being uncomfortable and taking risks

Second, in order to fulfill my promise to Father Anton Kerin, I had to travel along some difficult roads, which involved taking risks and allowing myself to feel uncomfortable. The same can be said about us as a Vincentian Family if we are to remain faithful to our promise to be the servants of those who are forgotten and abandoned and cast aside, the servants of our brothers and sisters who live in the midst of poverty and misery. If we are honest, I believe the majority of us would have to admit that we are not very comfortable with the reality of collaboration. A collaborative approach to ministry/service is more demanding than a lone-ranger approach. Because it is more demanding, we will naturally feel uncomfortable and might even attempt to avoid engaging in such an approach.

Let us take a minute to look at some of those demands that we might find threatening: collaborative ministry/service implies a willingness to surrender control and power, a willingness to join with others as equal

² BAUNARD, *Ozanam in his Correspondence*, Translated by a member of the Council of Ireland of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, Catholic Truth Society of Ireland, Dublin, 1925, p. 72.

partners in the decision-making process, a willingness to invite the poor to sit with us around the table where those decisions are made (decisions that affect them and their families). That style of ministry/service demands open and honest dialogue, as well as a willingness to compromise – a word that, in recent years, has taken on negative meanings, such as weakness, a betrayal of ideals, and a surrender of moral principles. All of that may make us uncomfortable because there is an implied risk, namely, at the very heart of the matter is the true and certain reality that today, you and I are being invited to change (and we will always feel uncomfortable and insecure when confronted with the need to change). You and I are being invited to change the ways in which we interact with one another, to change the ways in which we minister/serve, to change the ways in which we express our solidarity with the less fortunate members of society. The degree to which we are willing to engage in this process of conversion will determine the manner in which we, together in Christ and as Vincentians, make a difference today and tomorrow. It will determine the manner in which the promises of yesterday become a reality today.

Elements that will enhance our collaboration

Certain elements should characterize all of our joint efforts to make a difference in the world today and to bring to fulfillment the promises of yesterday. I know that if we were to make a list of those necessary elements, we would include prayer (in all its different forms), the practice of virtue, reading and reflection on the scriptures, attentive listening, etc. You know the list of elements. Here, however, I would like to refer to some other elements that do not always find a place on our lists, but elements that I believe are necessary if we are to be effective and influential mediators of God's promises. My list, in addition to the elements mentioned above, would also include:

- Curiosity: As we engage in joint ministry/service with the other branches and members of the Vincentian Family, we necessarily become involved in a constant search for order in the midst of chaos and for meaning in the midst of turmoil and suffering. That search leads us to ask the question, "why?" and as we continue our search, we discover another question, another "why?", and then another question and another "why?" This curiosity, however, should give us the courage to walk along new roads even if that means becoming bruised, hurting, and dirty because we have opted to journey along roads that are still under construction (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, # 49).

- Critical analysis: Curiosity and critical analysis go hand in hand. Curiosity asks, "is this true?", while critical analysis enables us to look behind such statements as, "this is the way we have always done things!

This is the way we have always acted!" This element of critical analysis is especially noteworthy since we are called to participate in the process of the New Evangelization, a process that is new in its ardor, new in its methods, and new in its expression.

- Creative imaging: *Love is inventive to infinity* (CCD:XI:131). *Your community [your group or your branch of the Vincentian Family] was not yesterday what it is now and there is reason to believe that it is still not what it will be when God has perfected it as he wants* (cf., CCD:IX:194). Curiosity leads to creative forms of imagination, which in turn sustain us in our efforts to proclaim the Good News as a present reality that is both "good" and "news" for those who are poor.

- Earthen vessels: an awareness of which enables us to maintain our perspective and see ourselves for what we are: *remember, you are dust, and unto dust you shall return* (Liturgy for Ash Wednesday); *I praise you because you made me in such a wonderful way. I know how amazing that was!* (Psalm 139:14). Listen to some of the words that Vincent used when speaking about himself: *I am a farmer's son who tended swine and cows, and... that is nothing compared to my ignorance and malice* (CCD:IV:219); *wretched man that I am, I preach to others but I'm so full of cursed thoughts* (CCD:X:10); *O Savior, forgive this wretched sinner, who spoils all Your plans* (CCD:XI:247); *I intend to be steadfast in the good I have begun, because that will be pleasing to God* (cf., CCD:X:159). Each of us has gifts and talents and strengths; each of us has limitations and blind spots and weaknesses. We are both great and small!

- An ability to dream of a better world: As members of a large extended Family we have dreams and visions of a new day: *we dream of a new heaven and a new earth in which every tear will be wiped from the eyes of all our brothers and sisters... we dream of a new heaven and a new earth where there will be no more death or mourning wailing or pain, for the old order has passed away* (cf., Revelation 21:1,4); *we dream of justice rolling down the mountain side like surging waters and we dream of righteousness as an ever-flowing stream* (cf., Amos 5:24). Nevertheless, we minister in one small area of the world and we can be tempted to think that our ministry/service is inconsequential in the overall scheme of reality. But that is not true. We should imagine that we are all part of a large jigsaw puzzle, a puzzle that is composed of hundreds of pieces. While we are just one piece, that piece is, nevertheless, essential and has great value; that piece, our piece of the puzzle, along with all the other pieces, does in fact contribute to changing the world. Together we make a difference.³

³ For further discussion of these elements from the perspective of systemic change see, SAUL D. ALINSKY, *Rules for Radicals*, Vintage Books, a division of Random House, New York, 1971, pp. 72-76.

Conclusion

We live in a world where people make promises of one kind or another every day and then forget that such promises were ever made. People, however, expect us to act differently; they expect us to be courageous and to keep our promises, to keep God's promises and the promises of our Founders. In 19th century France, people were discouraged and disheartened. Promises had been made to them and yet the majority of people continued to live in poverty. Frédéric Ozanam understood that situation and challenged the members of the Vincent de Paul Society with words that continue to challenge us in the 21st century. I would like to conclude this reflection with Frédéric's words: *The earth has become a chilly place. It is up to us Catholics [as Vincentians] to rekindle the flame of human warmth which is going out. It is up to us to recommence the great work of regeneration even if it means another era of martyrs. Can we remain passive in the midst of a world which is suffering and groaning? And as for us... are we going to make no attempt to be like those saints whom we love? If we do not know how to love God, for it seems that we need to see in order to love and we can only see God with the eyes of faith, and our faith is so weak! But... we do see them [the poor] with our eyes of flesh! They are there before us and we can place our finger and hand in their wounds and the marks of the crown of thorns are visible on their foreheads. Thus there is no possible room for unbelief and we should fall at their feet and say to them with the Apostle: "My Lord and my God! You are our master and we will be your servants. You are for us the sacred image of the God we cannot see. Since we know not how to love him otherwise, we will love him in your persons."*⁴

May God bless us all as we celebrate this season of Advent, a time in which God fulfills the promises that were made to our ancestors and that are renewed in this present era; a time in which God fulfills those promises by using us as humble instruments and zealous ministers.

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General

⁴ *Ozanam*, editors: Amin A. de Tarrazi and Fr. Ronald Ramson, C.M.; text: Pierre Pierrard, Amin A. Tarrazi, Caroline Morson, and Fr. Ronald Ramson, C.M., Editions de Signe and printed in Italy by Albagraf, Pomezia, 1997, p. 22.

SPOTLIGHT INTERVIEW

Bishop Vicente Zico, C.M.

Vinícius Augusto Ribeiro Teixeira, C.M.

1. Who was our confrere, Bishop Vicente Zico?

A man of God, a joyful Vincentian and a zealous pastor. Those are the most outstanding characteristics of Bishop Vicente Zico, who went to his eternal rest on May 4th, 2015. Let us present some of his story. It is right and just that we, his brothers in the Congregation, rejoice in the inspirations that have been communicated to us through his life story. Let us then follow the advice of the sacred author who commands us: *[honor] those godly persons who virtues have not been forgotten* (Sirach 44:10).

Vicente Joaquim Zico was born on January 27th, 1927 in the city of Luz (Minas Gerais), the son of very Christian parents who gave birth to eight children. Two of Vicente's brothers were also ordained as priests in the Congregation: Belchior Joaquim, later appointed bishop of the Diocese of Luz, and José Tobias, known for the important services that he provided to the Congregation in Brazil. Both were distinguished for their vast literary writings... Belchior, as a poet, and José, as an historian. One of their sisters became a contemplative nun when she entered Carmel. The other four children were married and raised their respective families. All the Zico children received a precious heritage from their parents, namely, a life of solid virtue... and here we refer to their strong faith, their discreet charity, a spirit of prayer, concern for the poor, a love of work and dedication to family. Through their father, who was a member of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society from the age of fifteen, the Zico children came to know about Vincent de Paul. Vicente was born and raised in the midst of this fruitful environment. Encouraged by his older brothers and supported by the prayers of his parents, it was easy for Vicente to discern the Lord's call to embrace the priesthood as a son of Saint Vincent de Paul.

At the age of eleven Vicente entered the Apostolic School of Caraça, the first house of the Congregation of the Mission in Brazil (1820). He remained there for five years and was able to enjoy the magnificent, natural architecture as he adapted to the rigid discipline of that era. He then went to Petrópolis (Rio de Janeiro) where he entered the Internal Seminary. Under the guidance of some wise and holy formators, he was able to deepen his understanding of the spirit that the Holy Founder wanted to instill in all the Missionaries. There, also, he

studied philosophy and theology... thus preparing himself for the sacrament of Orders. That was the era of the Second World War and Brazil, as an allied nation, prepared young men for their eventual participation in combat. Even though Vicente was in the second year of the Internal Seminary he was called up for military service and had to engage in rigorous training. With the conclusion of the war, Vicente was able to return to a life of prayer and study.

On October 22nd, 1950, after eight years of preparation, Vicente was ordained to the priesthood in the seminary chapel of Petrópolis. He was the third Zico brother invested in the priesthood of Jesus Christ, and as such, a member of the Little Company. Gifted with the ability to engage in the ministry of the formation of the clergy, Father Vicente served in various seminaries, the large diocesan seminaries (San Luis and Fortaleza) as well as the seminary of the Congregation (Petrópolis) and ministered as a professor, spiritual director, director of studies, rector, and superior. In each place he was admired for his goodness, wisdom, modesty, balance, good humor. His human qualities and priestly character were especially helpful during that turbulent period when ecclesiastical structures were being renewed and re-evaluated. The event that promoted such renewal was the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Father Vicente was also a provincial consultor and provincial secretary. Later, he spent two years in Paris and resided at the Motherhouse while studying Pastoral Theology at the Institut Catholique. Upon returning to Brazil he once again took up the position of provincial secretary (writing the newsletter and performing other services). In fact, the Visitor had planned for him to become the director of the Internal Seminary, but at that time there were no seminarians... the post-conciliar storm was still blowing hard.

Vicente was elected as a delegate to the 1974 General Assembly and then was elected as an Assistant General. He took up that position with his usual openness, happy to be able to serve the Congregation that had accepted him and prepared him for service in the Kingdom of God. For six years he worked beside Father James Richardson and then ministered for several months with Father Richard McCullen (Vicente had a great esteem for both of those Missionaries). As Assistant General he traveled to various countries, visited the confreres and encouraged them in their ministry of evangelizing the poor and forming the clergy and the laity... thus following the inspiration of the Founder of the Congregation. Many confreres still have fond memories of Father's presence and can still recall the words that he shared with them during his various visitations.

During this initial period of the life of Bishop Vicente we are able to see his ability to harmonize the constitutive elements of his vocation, namely, the development of an interior life through daily prayer and participation in the Eucharist. People took notice of his simple, cheer-

ful and respectful attitude and his warmth that illuminated and encouraged community life. He was an unselfish and generous missionary priest who graciously responded to the requests of the Congregation that he loved so much. The words of Jesus could easily be applied to the person of Vicente Zico: *he did all things well* (Mark 7:37). Saint Vincent's words seem to have been engraved on his heart, in gold letters: *how fortunate are those who use every moment of their life in the service of God* (CCD:XI:329)¹.

2. Could you speak about the episcopal ministry of the Bishop?

Vicente was a bishop who was shaped by the Second Vatican Council: an authentic pastor who possessed a deep spirituality, a tireless apostolic zeal, a great love for the Church and a desire to serve the People of God. From the very beginning the objective of his episcopal ministry was rooted in the threefold dimension of teaching, sanctifying and governing. He personified the description of the Council that is found in *Lumen Gentium: a bishop should keep before his eyes the example of the Good Shepherd, who came not to be waited upon but to serve* (#27). In his reflections during the Year of the Priest he presented one his deep convictions: *Our ministry is exercised not in the form of dominating the faithful or imposing our will upon them but rather in the form of serving them in a loving and dedicated manner*. Let us look at how all of this was done during the nearly thirty-five years that he served as bishop.

In December 1980 Vicente was appointed coadjutor archbishop of Belém and this appointment surprised him because at the time he was in Rome and was serving as a member of the General Curia. On January 6th, 1981, Vicente, together with ten other men, was ordained a bishop by Pope John Paul II in Saint Peter's Basilica. Beside the Holy Father was his brother, Belchior Neto who had been the bishop of Luz for many years. Bishop Vicente Zico chose as his motto, *Cum Maria, matre Jesu*, which expressed his love for the Mother of the Lord and his own willingness to embrace the Marian piety of the people. In fact, more than two centuries ago the people in Belém celebrated the *Cirio de Nazaret*, one of the most significant Marian feasts in the world which is celebrated on the second Sunday in October and at which time more than two million people process through the city. Bishop Zico would

¹ 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, p. 329; future references to this work will be inserted into the text using the initials [CCD] followed by the volume number, followed by the page number, for example (CCD:XI:329).

join this procession and viewed that as an opportunity to place himself *in the maternal hands of the one who bears all the sorrows of the world, the one who is infinitely beautiful, because she is infinitely good*, as Charles Péguy, the French poet and mystic liked to say (the bishop admired the process of conversion that led Péguy to embrace the Catholic faith).

The diocese with which Vicente entered into a covenant relationship is located in the heart of the Amazon... and that was unknown territory to the newly appointed bishop. Nevertheless, it became greatly loved by its pastor and from the very beginning the people were served with great missionary zeal, a zeal that was manifested by their pastor who was most anxious to serve the people of God. Belém, *the house of bread*, would now become his home and would remain as such for the remainder of his life. The Brazilian Amazon is an area of incredible biodiversity: rivers, virgin forests and diverse wildlife... all of these make up the majestic scenery that is so characteristic in the historic city of Belém, capital of the state of Pará. It is also a region of extreme social contrasts, lacking most resources while widely exploited as a result of its natural resources. There Bishop Zico found a reality that was both bewildering and challenging... a true mosaic of cultures and a vast poverty that enchained countless individuals. A ministry of charity and an evangelizing mission characterized the activity of this Vincentian bishop whose option on behalf of the poor was revealed in his pastoral initiatives. Faithful to the teaching of the Founder he came to understand that the charity that touched his heart was not only a treasure to preserve, but was also a way of life that was to consume him, a seed that was to be planted and cared for, a burning fire whose flame must be apostolic zeal for the salvation of his brothers and sisters (cf. CCD:XII:250). And so it was in his life: *When charity dwells in a soul, it takes full possession of all its powers; it gives it no rest; it's a fire that is constantly active* (CCD:XI:203).

Nine years after his arrival (1990) Bishop Vicente became the titular archbishop of Belém. Nevertheless, from the beginning, in a spirit of cooperation with his predecessor, Vicente initiated a fruitful ministry by visiting the parishes, providing a new dynamism to pastoral ministry, and revitalizing formation in the seminary. His prudent, conciliatory, and affable temperament enabled him to gain the trust and the confidence of the clergy, as well as the People of God. He knew how to approach the poor with a certain levity, moving through the peripheries of the city on foot, visiting hospitals, prisons and asylums. He became known as "Don Zico", the smiling and attentive bishop who extended a hand to, listened to, embraced, counseled and blessed everyone. There are countless testimonies of persons who were captivated by the Bishop's presence or by his warm words or by his effective assistance. It becomes obvious why the people of this area venerate

him. He himself would become emotional as he recounted some of the stories of his various encounters with people, for example, the story about the man who lived on the periphery of Belém and after the community was visited by the archbishop this man wrote the words *Calle Don Zico* [Don Zico Street] in carbon on the walls of his house that was built over the waters of the river. Bishop Vicente stated that the action of that man *presented him with the greatest honor that he could ever receive as a son of Saint Vincent*. Péguy himself stated that one's children *are always on the mind of their parents, always in their heart and always before their eyes... they are their most precious treasure*. The same could be said about the relationship between the poor and Bishop Zico: they were etched in his mind and pressed upon his heart... they were jewels of great value.

With the appointment of Bishop Zico the archdiocese gained considerable momentum, aligning itself with the spirit of communion and participation that was encouraged by Vatican II. Bishop Zico knew how to animate and encourage those who surrounded him and he was able to create a network of collaborators with bishops, priests, women religious and the laity ministering together. The number and the quality of his accomplishments reveal the fruitfulness of his ministry. The daily schedule of the bishop included meetings in the communities that he regularly visited as well as attendance at meetings in the Curia and at his residence. In an effort to revitalize the Archdiocesan structures, he worked on the development and implementation of two successive Pastoral Plans. He energized catechesis at every level, invested resources in the initial and ongoing formation of the clergy, promoted the training of laity, implemented a permanent diaconate program, animated missionary activity through popular missions, expanded the venues of Consecrated Life, dedicated time and energy to married couples and families, encouraged the role of young people, established a radio station and a TV channel, ensured the preservation of the heritage of the archdiocese and made the diocese self-sustaining, implemented ministry on the university level, consolidated Cirio of Nazareth as a privileged opportunity for evangelization (beginning with the evangelization of small groups). Bishop Vicente possessed an extraordinary human sensitivity that led him to intervene forcefully and with discernment in those situations that required his word and his presence, especially in situations that he viewed as important in order to promote the cause of those most in need and those who were the victims of injustice. For example, we recall here his prophetic *pronouncement on the social and economic situation of Pará* (1997), which had a great impact on public authorities. Indeed, all the initiatives of Bishop Zico arose from his loving heart and from his identification with the people of Pará who welcomed him in their midst and who have kept his memory alive. Yes, Bishop Vicente also had to confront misunderstand-

ings and adversity... but he was able to do so with a calmness, never offending those who defamed him (his ability to forgive was strengthened through prayer). He was convinced that his pastoral approach had to be a “way of love”, as well as “an ascetical path and a path of purification of resignation”.

Bishop Vicente’s activity was not limited to his beloved diocese. As a result of his position within the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops, he was responsible for the missionary dimension of the Church and as such he worked tirelessly to awaken the missionary consciousness in the many various dioceses of Brazil. He also traveled to seven African countries, visiting Brazilian missionaries who ministered in those countries. He was a member of the Missionary Commission of CELAM and was chosen to serve on the Pontifical Commission for Latin America (CAL). In each of these instances he was able to nourish and share his conviction that *the authenticity of the church was to be found in her missionary character*. In 1994 he was a delegate to the IV General Conference of Latin America Bishops which was held in Santo Domingo. All these different responsibilities required frequent international travel and yet, his heart remained in Belém and nothing could divert his gaze from the local Church that had been entrusted to his pastoral ministry. When he was questioned about those trips, he said that *the best part of the trip was his return to Belém*.

When his petition with regard to resigning was accepted by the Pope (Bishop Vicente was 77 years old), he wanted to return to the Congregation. He asked the Visitor of his province of origin to assign him to one of the houses of the province. The members of the province were very happy at the news of his return to them. His successor in Belém, however, wanted to have Vicente near to him and insisted that he remain in Belém and asked the people of the Diocese to join with him in that request. Bishop Zico decided to remain and his years as bishop-emeritus were fruitful... and here we are reminded of the words of the psalmist: *they shall bear fruit even in old age, always vigorous and sturdy* (Psalm 92:15). During this time the Bishop intensified his life of prayer by prolonging his time in contemplative meditation, thus deepening his relationship with the Lord. He updated himself theologically by selecting readings of renowned authors, rereading and reflecting upon the conciliar and papal documents, taking notes that would be incorporated into his later conferences. He dedicated much time to preaching retreats (especially to the clergy of the various dioceses and religious congregations) and to providing spiritual guidance to countless individuals. He spoke regularly on radio and television, responded to countless invitations to confer the sacrament of Holy Orders inside and out of the archdiocese, was frequently requested to celebrate the sacrament of Confirmation and celebrate patronal feasts in parishes and communities. During the Pauline Year (2008-2009) he stated: *there is so*

much to do, so many calls from God to exercise our priestly ministry and therefore to remain "busy doing nothing" (2 Thessalonians 3:11) would be an embarrassing mistake and a scandal. The many requests that he received made his routine as archbishop-emeritus both active and fruitful. That is very easy to understand... who would not want to be around the person of Msgr. Zico? Who did not feel captivated by his kindness, wisdom and holiness? Who did not appreciate his ability to speak from the depths of his heart, adapting his words to the condition of his listeners? A priest once said: *Bishop Vicente is quiet and yet he speaks to us and as he speaks, we are enchanted with his words.*

Finally, a beautiful image of this very human bishop can be found in a passage of the Conciliar Decree, *Christus Dominus* (the decree on the pastoral office of bishops in the church): *As spiritual guides of their flocks, bishops should be zealous in promoting the sanctity of their clergy, their religious and their laity according to the vocation of each individual, remembering that they are under an obligation to give an example of sanctity in charity, humility and simplicity of life (#15).* It is impossible to find a better image of the Good Shepherd than that of Bishop Vicente Joaquim Zico!

3. What are the primary characteristics of his spirituality?

There is no doubt that the primary source of the bishop's spirituality was the heritage that he received from Saint Vincent de Paul. This can be understood when one considers the centrality of the person of Jesus Christ in the bishop's life and ministry. That was a lesson that he learned from the founder: *nothing pleases me except Jesus Christ*². Bishop Zico found in Jesus Christ the sure point of reference for his consecrated life and for his zealous ministry in the service of God and in the service of his brothers and sisters. At the time of his ordination, he had a holy card printed with the words, *the priest is an "other" Christ*. He often referred to the liturgical prayer that is recited at the Eucharist for the first Sunday in Lent: *Grant almighty God... that we may grow in our understanding of the riches hidden in Christ and by worthy conduct, pursue their effects.* In his meditations during the year of the priest (2009-2010) he stated: *We as priests, as apostles who wish to follow Jesus Christ... we ought to embrace him, generously walk with him, open ourselves to his teaching, become enthusiastic about him, adopt his lifestyle, become his true disciples, follow him and thus make Jesus Christ our*

² L. ABELLY, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul: Founder and First Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission*, 3 vol., edited by John E. Rybolt, C.M., translated by William Quinn, FSC, notes by Edward R. Udovic, C.M. and John E. Rybolt, C.M., introduction by Stafford Poole, C.M., New City Press, New Rochelle, New York, 1993, volume I, p. 103.

life. He then went on to highlight the compassion of Jesus Christ for the poor, another aspect of Vincentian spirituality that the bishop internalized in his life as a missionary and as a pastor: *the human face of God became known through the person of Jesus Christ who was admired and loved by the people because of his attentiveness to the situation of the poor, the infirm, the "little ones", those afflicted in any manner, those who were excluded... an important aspect of Jesus' mission was to reveal his humanness, his compassionate heart... in following Jesus Christ, the priest should first of all give witness to the fact that he himself understands the human condition.*

As a result of this radical identification with the Lord, Bishop Zico highlighted another aspect of his spirituality, an aspect that was in accord with the spirit of Vincent de Paul... and here we refer to his trust in Divine Providence. During a retreat that he preached for our seminarians during the Year of Faith (2012-2013) he stated: *I am constantly invited to live with an awareness of the truth of the words that Vincent de Paul spoke: if we allow ourselves to be led by Divine Providence, everything will come to a good conclusion.* Throughout his life the bishop was strengthened by that trust in Providence which made him more available, more trusting, fruitful in his discernment and tireless in giving of himself. Another aspect of the Vincentian heritage that Bishop Vicente clothed himself in was the five virtues that Vincent de Paul impressed upon the members of the Congregation as indelible marks of their spiritual and missionary life: *let each and every one of us strive to enclose ourselves in these five virtues, like snails in their shells, and act in such a way that all our actions savor of these virtues* (CCD:XII:252). In fact, the life of Bishop Zico reflected all of those virtues. He developed **simplicity** which made him accessible to all people, especially to the poor and enabled him to act almost flawlessly in his procedures. **Humility** did not allow him to place himself at the center of things or attribute some merit to the things that he did. **Gentleness** was revealed in the calmness of his face... the bishop radiated peace and his gestures were expressions of tenderness and consolation. The bishop exercised **mortification** during times of trial, especially when his good intentions were viewed as suspect... at all times he revealed his willingness to persevere in doing good and to never repay evil with evil. The creative fulfillment of his duties, particularly his evangelizing activity, was marked by missionary **zeal** and it was this same zeal that enabled him to become *all things to all people* (I Corinthians 9:22). It is clear that Vincent de Paul played an important role as the bishop defined his personality. We refer at this time to a fragment from a retreat that he preached to the confreres of the Fortaleza Province on the occasion of the 350th anniversary of the death of Saint Louise and Saint Vincent. He stated: *In my opinion to know Vincent de Paul is to value and admire his spiritual experience, the genuineness of*

his charity and his zeal on behalf of the poor... this enables us to also love Vincent de Paul. As a priest and in my ministry as a bishop I continue to nourish and develop my knowledge about this saint; I continue to familiarize myself with his spirituality. Yes, we have an obligation to know him and to make him known to others. This obligation arises from the conviction that Saint Vincent has much to say to the world today... especially to the members of the Vincentian Family.

Another key to understanding the spirituality of Bishop Zico is found in his coat of arms which summarizes the programmatic content of his ministry. Side by side are the Word and the Eucharist... the word which Bishop Zico reflected upon with docility, the word that he attempted to live and that he preached with humble eloquence. There also is the Eucharist which he celebrated every day, the center of his life and the driving force behind his ministry. The star on the blue background evokes the presence of Mary, the mother of Jesus and a model for those who love and follow Jesus. The selection of his motto, taken from Acts 1:14, was intended to honor Saint John Paul II, the pope who appointed him and ordained him as bishop. The river running through the crest symbolizes the Amazon, where his ministry was developed in a fruitful manner. The words that Bishop Vicente Zico utilized when referring to his predecessor in 1991, provide us with his own profile: *the more a bishop identifies himself with the desires and preferences of the flock that he shepherds, the more it becomes apparent that the Holy Spirit has discovered in that individual the appropriate person to exercise the episcopal ministry.*

4. Bishop Zico's relationship with the Congregation of the Mission and with the Vincentian Family

Even after his appointment as Bishop, Vicente Zico always maintained a close relationship of unity with the Congregation. He was truly happy and grateful to be a member of the Little Company. He was concerned about all that happened in the Congregation and faithfully read *Vincentiana*, *Nuntia*, *CLAPVI* and *Informativo São Vicente*. Once during a visit, he showed me his copy of the Constitutions and Statutes... it was wonderful to hear him speak about Saint Vincent and the charism that had been passed on to us. The bishop spoke about our Founder and the saints and the blessed of the Vincentian Family with great reverence... he often cited them in his writings, speeches and dialogues. He took advantage of every opportunity to visit our houses and to spend time with the confreres. He accepted every invitation to participate in our feast day celebrations and ordinations... Bishop Zico ordained many of our confreres. At the same time the Bishop had many fond memories of his time in our Province and at the General Curia (he would speak about specific individuals and events). The retreats

that he preached to us are memorable for the manner in which he presented to us the Vincentian heritage.

The Daughters of Charity also experienced the fraternal concern of Bishop Vicente: spiritual direction, retreats, special celebrations, confessions, visits, etc... countless Sisters can speak about the encouragement that they received from the bishop. I remember what a young Sister once told me: *When I would go to confession to Bishop Zico, I would leave with the impression that I became better than I was.* Those words reflect the usual ease with which he comforted and encouraged those persons who approached him. We could also say that the zeal of Bishop Vicente was extended to the Vincentian Family, to the many men and women who belong to that Family, who found his words and ministry to be an ardent incentive to practice missionary charity. He was most happy to see the *Obras Completas de San Vicente* being translated into Portuguese. The *imprimatur* for the first four volumes was obtained from him. He spoke about the joy of being able to savor the spiritual wisdom of our Holy Founder in his own language. During that retreat to the confreres of the Fortaleza Province, he stated: *it is a joy and a grace to read and to listen to Saint Vincent who reveals himself as true spiritual master, simple, a man of great clarity as he explains his thoughts and ideas, concise, and able to nourish the hearts of his sons and daughters with great wisdom and enthusiasm.*

5. A personal testimony concerning Bishop Vicente Zico

What impressed me most about Bishop Vicente was his extraordinary ability to harmonize goodness and truth, generosity and uprightness. There was great coherency among his convictions, his words and his attitudes. The attribute of loyalty is clearly visible in the manner in which he interacted with and related with others. Through his gentle presence he was able to communicate to others the values that guided him as a man of God. The integrity of a person might seem to be extremely dry unless a magnanimous heart throbs inside that same individual. Largeness of heart, human sensitivity, willingness to go out to meet others... all these were prominent personality traits of Bishop Vicente. He knew how to be both cheerful and polite, how to be close to people and prudent. He did not become upset with people... indelicate words and arrogant gestures were never associated with him. Those who approached him felt welcomed, respected and valued; everyone, even the simplest, felt that they could be more and better. That was Bishop Vicente: truthful and good until the end of his days, like a fresh-flowing river where everyone could quench his/her thirst.

Another characteristic of Bishop Vicente that greatly edified me was his identification with his vocation and ministry. He was excited to be a Vincentian priest and bishop. He said that he did not know how to live in any other way than that of being truthful. No wonder he could identify himself with the words of Saint Paul: *by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me has not been ineffective* (1 Corinthians 15:10). He did not need to seek anything beyond the horizons of his consecration: contemplation and action, prayer and service. Everything in his life was directed to the mission. In Brazil, we have a song that states: *I am the good shepherd and I will guard the sheep. I have and never will have any other job. How ever many lives I have, I will give them all to my sheep.* Such was Bishop Vicente. He had no other job, no other satisfaction and no other occupation but that which was entrusted to him in order to continue the mission of Christ. Thus he gave his all in everything he did, and did well all those things that were entrusted to him... in fact, everything that he touched was imprinted with his wisdom and holiness. To paraphrase Pope Francis, the mission was not an *appendix* in the life of Bishop Zico. *"The mission was his life"* (Evangelii Gaudium, #273). And the secret of all this, the mystery of the heart of Bishop Vicente (a heart that never lost its purity and cheerfulness) was revealed in the words that he spoke to his successor at the time that his earthly pilgrimage was about to come to an end, that is, when he was informed about the irreversible condition of his health: *I have no fear of eternity; I love the Lord with all my heart!*

I recall here the fact that I had the privilege to accompany the bishop on his last trip to Belém where the Lord would gather him up, like ripe fruit, and gift him with eternal life. He had gone to spend some time in Belo Horizonte where he visited his family and his confreres. As usual, he stayed at our house and we all rejoiced at his presence and his participation in the life of community. He celebrated the Eucharist in our parish and attended all those who approached him. I, myself, would take advantage of this opportunity to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation with him. On the fourth day of his visit, he experienced severe abdominal pain. We wanted to take him to the hospital and place at his disposal all the resources of the Province. He, however, expressed his desire to return quickly to his beloved Belém. He called me aside and asked me if I could accompany him on this trip back. Without blinking an eye, I said, *yes*. Actually, that same night I had planned to travel to the house of the Daughters of Charity in Rio de Janeiro where I was to participate in a meeting. I called the Sisters and explained the situation and I asked to be excused from that commitment. The next day, Saturday, I bought an airline ticket and traveled to Belém. What an unforgettable experience! During the three-hour flight, the Bishop tried to sleep and also tried to hide the pain that

consumed him. I was emotional and yet grateful because I knew that I was sitting beside a saint, a man who knew how to serve God and others with integrity. The bishop was beginning his last offertory, *lying in the arms of maternal Providence while listening closely to the soft chimes of the bell of an eternal Easter* (C. Péguy).

* * *

As a result of the manner in which he lived, Bishop Vicente Joaquim Zico will always be remembered by those who knew him. He will continue to inspire us, his confreres, with the desire to be good and true, to be faithful to the vocation that we have received and to fulfill our mission, so that, as for him, so also for us, “God speaks, and in speaking he hands himself over to us. He loves, and in loving he hands his happiness over to us. The God we hear speaking is efficacious hope, a God new from all eternity” (C. Péguy). Thank you, beloved Bishop Vicente!

Translated: CHARLES T. PLOCK, C.M.

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.¹ 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

¹ 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.² 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-

² 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.

THEME:

400 Years of Service to the Poor in the Vincentian Family



Approaching the 400th Anniversary

How We Have Lived and Adapted the Vincentian Charism
During Recent Years

Alicia Duhne

AIC International President

Everything began 400 years ago in Châtillon

Much has happened since the time when Vincent de Paul preached that famous sermon which resulted in the establishment of the first Confraternity of Charity on 23 August 1617.

During his lifetime Vincent de Paul, with the support of Louise de Marillac and many volunteers, promoted the Confraternities both inside France as well as beyond the borders of France.

Today we are called the AIC – the International Association of Charities and we form an international network composed of more than 150,000 members who are ministering in 53 countries on four continents. It is in those places that we continue to struggle against poverty and its causes.

Our mission: following the example of Saint Vincent de Paul and, in accord with the Church's teaching, we have defined our mission as follows:

- To fight against all forms of poverty and exclusion, by actions and projects of transformation;

- To accompany women in specific ways in their search for empowerment and autonomy;
- To speak out against injustices, to put pressure on the structures and the decision-makers, to fight against the causes of poverty.

In light of our mission, we want

- To be a force of transformation within society and in the fight against poverty;
- To be involved first and foremost with women worldwide;
- To reinforce the participation of the poor;
- To encourage collaboration and networking; to be involved in local political issues, aware of the responsibility of all the players.

Specific activities of the local groups of the AIC

In the 53 National Associations of the AIC there are more than 13,800 projects that involve the members in the struggle against poverty.

Our strengths and priorities are the following:

- **Local roots:** projects in the field are initiated exclusively by members who work together in AIC teams. The members, mainly women, are experts in the fight against poverty. Their activities in their immediate environment give them knowledge of the local reality. This expertise is often recognized by public authorities as well as local and international partners.

- **Attention to the person as a whole:** AIC projects place fundamental importance on the person. Members establish individual relationships with the people with whom they work. They follow methods taught by their Founder, Saint Vincent de Paul: attention given to persons as a whole, respect for their cultural identity, ongoing concern for their self-promotion, understanding the need to engage in a struggle against poverty and injustice, and knowledge of the economic, political, social, and religious realities of each community.

- **Special attention to women in poverty:** 80% of the beneficiaries of our projects are women and their children. The world of women is often a reality that is marked by poverty and injustice. Therefore, there is a great need for social, political, evangelizing, and Vincentian activity in order to develop gender equality and to promote the rights of women. The condition in which so many women live is, without a doubt, one of “the signs of the time.”

- **Education as a priority:** education is a primary component of the AIC projects and is essential in our struggle against poverty. Local activity creates the opportunity for a mutual exchange between the

members and the beneficiaries of our ministry. This exchange leads to a discovery of one's gifts and talents and leads both the members and the beneficiaries to engage in activity that enables people to break the chains of poverty.

- **Creation of social bonds:** the causes of poverty are not just rooted in economic factors but arise from the isolation of people. The projects that the AIC promotes are intended to help people move out of their isolation so that they can begin to feel that they are a part of the community.

Forming Public Opinion

The AIC attempts to form public opinion with regard to the situations of poverty and exclusion. The AIC challenges local, national, and international governing bodies, civil and religious leaders, while at the same time denouncing situations of poverty that are encountered everyday by our members. On an international level, the representatives of the AIC exert pressure and present proposals to various bodies of the UN (UNESCO, ECOSOC, the Human Rights Commission) and to the European Council. We do this with the hope that the voice of the poor will be taken into consideration during the deliberations of these various administrative bodies. The AIC is also a member of the Pontifical Commission, *Cor Unum*, and participates in the activities of the International Catholic Center of Cooperation as they interact with the various agencies of the UN.

Projects

Within the context of the different local situations, each project is unique and geared toward the people of a specific area and initiated by the members of that area. Though unique, we have noticed some similar tendencies with regard to the numerous projects:

Education:

Many of the AIC projects are focused on education/formation. Many adult educational projects are literacy programs and professional formation programs that attempt to reinsert individuals into the work force. Many other educational activities take the form of workshops that are offered at various times of the year. For children we offer day-care centers, pre-school educational centers, assistance in doing school work, scholarships.

Caring for older adults:

A constant concern is providing care to the elderly who in many cases have been abandoned by their family and/or who do not receive

adequate care. Members have established homes and drop-in centers for the elderly.

Shelter for children:

In Africa, as well as in Latin America, we have established housing for children who have been abandoned and/or abused. In the majority of these homes we seek ways to reintegrate these children into society. We do not want the children to feel disconnected or as though they are living in some unknown place.

Temporary shelter:

As we provide assistance to immigrants we have various centers where people are able to rest before continuing their journey. We provide these individuals with information that will help them arrive at their destination.

Nutrition:

Since education is a priority with regard to the development of persons, many of the projects of the AIC involve "health care and nutrition" because we are aware of the fact that the whole person must be cared for and bad nutrition and ill-health are serious obstacles with regard to education.

Thus, various groups provide hot meals in soup kitchens that minister to children and the elderly.

Many groups of the AIC also exercise their ministry by distributing food to those who are in need.

Health:

In many countries, especially where there is no health insurance, to become ill is a serious problem. In Latin American our members have opened dispensaries and convalescent homes that provide for people during the time of their treatment as well as after they are released from the hospital.

In almost all the countries where the AIC is present the members organize visits to the infirm who are hospitalized and also are attentive to the needs of invalids and their families.

Welcoming centers:

The community centers of the AIC are places of understanding, listening and welcoming. The members establish social relationships with those individuals who frequent these places. In many parts of the world there are thrift shops and drop-in centers for those who are unemployed or retired, for immigrants, for drug addicts and for homeless persons. There are also centers that provide assistance to the family members of those who are imprisoned.

Individual accompaniment:

There are many different programs of accompaniment. Some of this accompaniment is accomplished through home visits, hospital visits, and visits with those persons who are imprisoned. All of these programs are intended to break the chains of isolation and to promote the integral development of the person.

Formation of members

Following the example of Saint Vincent, who from an early age was concerned about education (in fact, education was a lifelong concern of both Vincent and Louise), we engage in an ongoing process of formation.

Here we invite everyone to reflect on the words of Father Celestino Fernández: *for a Vincentian, formation is a matter of justice with regard to the poor whom we wish to serve.* We are aware of the fact that we have an obligation to form ourselves in an ongoing manner.

Therefore, we offer ongoing technical, human, and spiritual formation. Each two or four years we focus on specific themes which we call **“Priority Lines of Action.”** For the years 2011-2017 we have decided to focus on the following: **education, reciprocity, ministering together, and an exchange of gifts and talents.** Formation is accomplished through sharing documents and through national, continental, and international seminars.

As we prepare to celebrate the 400th anniversary of our charism, we have developed material that will enable the members to deepen their understanding of this charism. These brief reflection papers are sent out each month and usually the groups reflect on and discuss these papers during the time of their meeting.

Recently we have offered courses: *Formation for institutional strengthening*, the objective of which is to provide the members with the necessary tools and knowledge in order:

- To ground themselves in the fundamental concepts that make them members of the AIC (that is, the essence of what constitutes them as members of the AIC).
- To develop those competencies that will enable the members to minister in a more effective manner (that is, we want to provide the members with the tools that will enable them to minister in an organized and coordinated manner).
- To provide the members with better knowledge in the area of developing projects, fund-raising, social communication, strategic planning.
- To develop leadership and professionalism among our members.

During our recent Assembly (March 2015) that took place in Guatemala, we gave out 434 certificates to members in Latin America who had completed their studies (a nine-month period). This course is offered in Spanish and Portuguese.

As a result of the enthusiasm of our members we decided to offer this course again and there are presently 148 participants. We are preparing to offer this same course in English and French.

Significant elements and challenges that our Vincentian Heritage presents to the members of our Association

As members of the Vincentian Family we are aware of the fact that we are part of the Church. Nevertheless we have significant elements that distinguish us as we opt to minister primarily on behalf of our brothers and sisters who live in a situation of poverty. We base our life on the teachings of our Founders and on the Church's teachings.

We attempt to be sensitive to the suffering of our neighbor and we are also aware of the fact that as human beings, even though we are different, we all share the same dignity.

Throughout the AIC network we accomplish our ministry as a group and we combine actions with prayer.

The challenges are numerous. Here are those that seem most important to us:

I. We rely more and more on promotional projects

We know that providing assistance (and nothing more) will never resolve the situation of poverty, but in fact aggravates the situation and very often makes the beneficiaries of such assistance dependent on us. Vincent, in his writings, expressed this same concern:

I can tell you that their original intention was to assist only those who cannot work nor earn their living and would be in danger of dying of starvation if someone did not assist them. In fact, as soon as anyone is strong enough to work, tools of his trade are bought for him and nothing more is given to him. Accordingly, the alms are not for those able to work on the fortifications or to do something else, but for seriously ill sick persons, orphans, or the elderly.¹

They would also like to enable all other poor people who have no land – men as well as women – to earn their own living, by giving the

¹ 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 IV, p. 188; 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:IV:188.

men some tools for working and the girls and women spinning wheels and flax or linen for spinning – but only the poorest (CCD:VIII:82-83).

II. To clothe ourselves in a Vincentian attitude

To respect the freedom and the dignity of the person who is being assisted;

Not to stain our purity of intention with any form of self-interest or any desire to dominate others;

To be aware of Christ's presence in those who are poor;

To be contemplatives in action aware of that fact that *to serve those who are poor is to go to God (CCD:IX:5).*

III. To work tirelessly on behalf of the spread of our charism

The words of Jesus are still valid today: *the harvest is great but the laborers are few.*

This is indeed a constant concern for every branch of the Vincentian Family which sees a decrease in its membership. Yes we are presented with a great challenge in our attempts to increase our numbers so that we might continue Jesus's mission. Let us recall here the words of Saint Vincent:

It's not enough for me to love God, if my neighbor doesn't love him. I have to love my neighbor as the image of God and the object of his love (CCD:XII:215).

IV. Develop a deep faith

Only faith can enable us to view, with a proper perspective, the good that we are able to accomplish.

V. To trust in the strength of others

To trust in the strength of others implies a change in our attitude. This new attitude of appreciation should be shown not only to those persons whom we accompany in our ministry but also to our Vincentian brothers and sisters.

When considering those persons with whom we minister, we should develop two basic attitudes:

– To view all people (without exception) as the subject of rights and duties; to trust in the ability of each person to better him/herself and to move forward.

– In our activity we are not attempting to resolve problems but rather we want to engage in a process of accompaniment.

On 9 July 2014, during his participation in the Second World Meeting of Popular Movements in Bolivia, Pope Francis stated: *I have heard a phrase which I like: "Process of change". Change seen not as something*

which will one day result from any one political decision or change in social structure. We know from painful experience that changes of structure which are not accompanied by a sincere conversion of mind and heart sooner or later end up in bureaucratization, corruption and failure. There must be a change of heart. That is why I like the image of a "process", processes, where the drive to sow, to water seeds which others will see sprout, replaces the ambition to occupy every available position of power and to see immediate results.

VI. To recognize the poor as a gift that is given to us

Through our relationships with the poor we discover our limitations and our own prejudices, while at the same time we also become aware of our own growth. In the poor we are able to admire some of the following:

- Their ability to develop gifts that enable them to survive;
- Their ability to develop positive relationships, to maintain physical and emotional distance without falling into isolation;
- Their ability to utilize those relationships in order to obtain some basic needs; their ability to be empathetic with others;
- Their sense of humor which enables them to find comedy in the midst of tragedy.

VII. A sense of belonging

Each branch of the Vincentian Family has its proper identity. The members of each branch ought to provide for the material and the spiritual needs of those who are poor and yet we must be mindful of the fact that we are related with various institutions:

- First of all, we belong to the Church, our Mother.
- Second, we are members of the Vincentian Family. *Charisms are given to specific individuals and yet other individuals are able to participate in those charisms. Thus in the present era those charisms remain alive and are to be treated as a precious inheritance that creates unique bonds among people.*
- Lastly, there is a group of people who are also members of the AIC.

This is a brief presentation of who we are and what we hope to be. We pray that our celebration of the 400th anniversary of the establishment of our charism might deepen our understanding of this great heritage and might unite the whole Vincentian Family as, together, we serve those men and women who are poor.

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

Lauro Palú, C.M.

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.*¹

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

¹ *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.

The Daughters of Charity in the Church

At the time of the 400th anniversary of the origin
of their charism

María Ángeles Infante, DC

1. A charism rooted in the experience of Châtillon

Vincent was convinced of the fact that our Charism flowed from the experience at Châtillon. That charism flowed from an inspiration of grace that touched the hearts of sensitive men and women. It was also a response that expressed people's solidarity with their more needy brothers and sisters and, therefore, the charism was rooted in a response to an urgent need. Those three elements were present in the response to the events that occurred during the time of August 1617, events that gave origin to the establishment of the charism as expressed in service on behalf of Christ present in the person of the poor. On 13 February 1646, Vincent spoke about this in a conference that he gave to the Sisters: *I'll tell you, then, that while I was living in a small town near Lyons, where Providence had called me to be the Pastor, I was vesting to celebrate Holy Mass one Sunday when I was told that in an isolated house a quarter of a league away everyone was ill. None of them was able to help the others, and they were all in indescribable need. **That touched me** to the heart. During the sermon, I made sure to commend them zealously to the congregation, and God, **touching the hearts** of those who heard me, **moved them with compassion** for those poor afflicted people.*¹

In the beginning there was a movement of compassion that was rooted in the Spirit, the source of the true charity that touched the hearts of people and made them compassionate: *That touched me to the heart. During the sermon, I made sure to commend them zealously to the congregation, and God, touching the hearts of those who heard me, moved them with compassion for those poor afflicted people* (CCD:IX:192).

¹ 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 IX, p. 192; 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:IX:192.

We recall here the details surrounding that event. On Sunday, 20 August, Françoise Baschet and Mademoiselle de Chassigne² entered the sacristy to tell Vincent that in the area outside the village there was a poor family in extreme need: all the members of the family were ill and they had no food or medicine. There was no one to help them. This news touched the heart of the good priest and he was filled with compassion. In his sermon he explained with great ardor and zeal the situation of that poor family and he touched the hearts of those who listened to him. Vincent's compassion was contagious in as much as the hearts of the parishioners were moved. In the afternoon Vincent, accompanied by an upright citizen of the town, went to visit that family. He was surprised to find a multitude of persons on the road who were coming and going to visit that family and to provide them with some food. It seemed as though he was observing a pilgrimage. Vincent arrived at the house and saw for himself the extreme need of that family. He administered the sacraments to the seriously ill members of the family. He also saw the great amount of food that the parishioners had given and he thought: *this poor sick family will be overwhelmed with so much in such a short time, most of which will spoil. Afterward they will be no better off than before.*³ There was a need to organize this charitable activity.

Three days later, Wednesday, 23 August, Vincent put his plan in motion. He gathered together a group of pious women from the village, among whom were: Françoise Baschet, Mademoiselle de Chassigne, Charlotte de Brie, and Madame Denise Beynier (the wife of M. Claude Bouchour). Those women were moved by compassion and Vincent encouraged them to create an association in order to provide for the sick poor of that area (cf., CCD:XIIIb:3-5). The following day those women committed themselves to begin that good work, each one taking a turn to serve those persons whom they decided together to be in need of their help.

The proposed Rule brought together some essential elements:

- The Rule gave an organizational structure to the service that was to be offered, that is, caring for the sick poor in their homes;

² Mademoiselle de Chassigne was the sister of the famous poet and mathematician, Claude Gaspar Bachet de Méziriac, one of the 40 members who formed part of the initial group that was inducted into the French Academy, cf. GEORGES GOYAU, *Les dames de la Charité de Monsieur Vincent (1617-1660)* [The Ladies of Charity of M. Vincent (1617-1660)], Editorial Art Catholique, 6 Place Saint-Sulpice, Paris, 1918, p. 6.

³ LOUIS ABELLY, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul: Founder and First Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission*, 3 volumes, edited by John E. Rybolt, C.M., translated by William Quinn, FSC, notes by Edward R. Udovic, C.M. and John E. Rybolt, C.M., introduction by Stafford Poole, C.M., New City Press, New Rochelle, New York, 1993.

- It outlined an evangelical spirituality based on the Beatitudes: humility, simplicity and charity;
- It highlighted professional competency as the members engaged in service with tenderness, responsibility and attentiveness;
- All of this was done under the watchful eye and the protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary: *And because, when the Mother of God has been invoked and taken as patroness in important matters, everything can only go well and accrue to the glory of Jesus her Son, the Ladies took her for patroness and protector of the work* (CCD:XIIIb:3).

On 24 August 1617, the feast of Saint Bartholomew, the first Confraternity of Charity began to function in Châtillon. Thus was born the charism of organized charity that was intended to serve the poor in the various parishes.

2. From the Confraternities to the Daughters of Charity

From that same event arose the establishment of the Company of the Daughters of Charity (29 November 1633). Vincent himself was convinced of that reality. During the 13 February 1646 conference to the Sisters on the love of their vocation and assistance to the poor, Vincent described the origins of the Company as flowing from the establishment of the Confraternity at Châtillon and later in Villepreux and other parishes in Paris. In that same conference he reminded the Sisters about the life, mission, and death of Marguerite Naseau and stated: *And that, Sisters, was the beginning of your Company. As it wasn't then what it is now, there's reason to believe that it's still not what it will be when God has perfected it as He wants it; for, Sisters, don't think that Communities are formed all at once ... your institution is not the work of human persons, you may therefore boldly declare, Sisters, that it's the work of God* (CCD:IX:194).

Several events seemed to come together and ultimately led to the establishment of the Company:

- Louise's Pentecost experience (1623);
- The need to care for the sick poor and to instruct young girls in the rural villages;
- The weaknesses in the organizational structure of the Confraternities and the resulting decrease in the quality of service that those women offered to the poor;
- The presence of young women who desired to commit themselves totally to God in order to serve the poor.

As a result of her Pentecost experience Louise heard God's call to form a small community of women. Everything with regard to this

idea, however, was not clear; there were lights and shadows. She did not know what form such a group would have: would the members commit themselves totally through the profession of vows; would they live a common life; would they be involved in the mission of serving the poor? Little by little, with the help of Vincent de Paul and through the inspiration of the Spirit, Louise's mission became clear. At the same time there arose in the Confraternities certain irregularities with regard to the service that the women provided to the sick poor (for example, a weakening of their organizational structure). Vincent recognized the fact that all was not well and also perceived that God wanted to raise up in the midst of his Church the Company of the Daughters of Charity. Vincent sent Louise, a good organizer, to the various Confraternities to help them reorganize and focus on their mission. During those visits Louise met young women who wanted to give their life to God in order to serve the poor and Louise welcomed these young women into her home where she formed them and accompanied them.

In the midst of all those comings and goings the presence of Marguerite Naseau seemed to illuminate the path. Her death (February 1633) opened new paths that led to further discernment on the part of the Founders. In 1642 Vincent stated that Marguerite had no other teacher but God and that she opened the way for other young women. She was a *spirit-filled evangelizer*, that is, she was a woman who possessed all the qualities that Pope Francis speaks about when referring to spirit-filled evangelizers. When speaking about Marguerite Naseau, Vincent stated: *It's clear that God was powerfully at work there* (CCD:IX:193) and as a result Marguerite *attracted to this other girls, whom she had helped to detach themselves from all superficial things and to embrace a devout life* (CCD:IX:66). After Marguerite other young women came forward and *they began to meet and come together almost imperceptibly* (CCD:IX:166).

In light of that experience one is able to understand the meaning of the ministries of the Daughters of Charity and their openness to every poor person and every form of poverty. According to Saint Vincent the Company was born with four important characteristics that accompanied the charism of charity:

- God acted with his power (CCD:IX:166-167) and sent forth the Daughters in order to console those who were poor. On 31 July 1643 Vincent affirmed that reality when he said: *God has made you to be their consolers* (CCD:IX:5).

- The Company is a community in which each Sister lives out her vocation with an attitude of total surrender to God in order to fulfill a mission, namely, the mission of caring for the sick poor in their homes, instructing young girls in small schools and providing for other poor persons who are in need: *you have a vocation obliging you to help equally*

all sorts of persons: men, women, children, and in general every poor person who needs your assistance, as you're doing, by the grace of God (CCD:X:363).

- The Sisters viewed themselves as women who continued the mission of Jesus Christ through the practice of humility, simplicity, and charity and those other virtues proper to the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience and also to that vow proper to the Company, the vow of serving Christ in the poor: *Whoever sees the life of Jesus Christ would see far and away the similarity in the life of a Daughter of Charity. And what did He come to do? He came to teach and to enlighten. That's what you're doing. You're continuing what he began (CCD:IX:466).*

- The Sisters live and serve with an attitude of total availability: *You have to teach persons who are poor wherever you find occasion to do so – not only the children in your schools, but all poor persons, whom you assist without distinction (CCD:X:118).*

3. The charism lived with an attitude of personal availability and through a diversity of ministries

Since the very beginning of the Company there has been a willingness on the part of the Daughters to come and go to those places where the poor cry out for them and to those places where their Superiors have sent them. This characteristic has led the Sisters to exercise their ministry in many distinct places and that reality should be remembered as we approach the 400th anniversary of the origin of our charism. Vincent himself realized that fact as he interpreted history and everyday events. On 18 October 1655, Vincent described that reality as he explained the purpose of the Company to the Sisters:

*You, dear Sisters, have given yourselves to God principally to live as good Christian women, to be good Daughters of Charity, to work at the virtues proper to your end, and **to assist the sick poor**, not in one house only, like those in the Hotel-Dieu, but **everywhere**, as Our Lord used to do, for He made no exceptions; He assisted everyone who came to Him for help. That's what our Sisters began to do with the sick, assisting them with such care; and when God saw how well they were doing it, seeking out the poor in their own homes as Our Lord most often did, He said, "These Sisters please me; they've done so well in this ministry that I'm going to give them a second one." That referred to those poor **abandoned children**, Sisters, who had no one to care for them, and Our Lord willed to use the Company to look after them, for which I thank His Goodness.*

So then, when He saw that you had taken that on with so much charity, He said, "I also want to give them another ministry." Yes,

Sisters, it's God who gave it to you, without your ever thinking of it, nor did Mlle Le Gras – no more than I did – for that's how God's works are accomplished, without human persons thinking of them.

*When a work has no author, we have to say that it's God who has done it. But what is this ministry? It's assisting poor criminals or convicts. Ah! Sisters, what a happiness to serve those **poor convicts abandoned** into the hands of persons who have no pity for them! I've seen those poor men treated like animals; that caused God to be moved with compassion. They inspired pity in Him; as a result, His Goodness did two things on their behalf: first, He had a house bought for them; second, He willed to arrange matters in such a way as to have them served by His own daughters, because to say a Daughter of Charity is to say a daughter of God.*

*He also willed to give those Sisters another ministry, namely, **the care of the sick poor, the poor elderly people** in the Nom-de-Jesus Hospice, **and those poor persons who have lost their minds**. Yes, Sisters, it's God himself who willed to make use of the Daughters of Charity to look after those poor mental patients. What a happiness for all of you! But, what a great grace for those Sisters engaged in this work to have such a beautiful means of rendering service to God and to His Son Our Lord! (CCD:X:102-103).*

In a clear and simple manner Vincent has described for us the origin and the meaning of the diverse ministries of the Daughters of Charity. In this regard the power of the charism was most important and was revealed as:

- **A gift of the Spirit** that was alive in the heart of Marguerite Naseau: *it is clear that God was powerfully at work there* (CCD:IX:193).

- **A power that led** one to renounce everything, especially honors and greatness on a human level. Marie Denyse and Barbe Angiboust gave witness to that renunciation and Vincent admired that power of the Spirit: *What do you think of that, Mademoiselle? Are you not delighted to see the strength of the spirit of God in those two poor young women and the contempt that He has given them for the world and its greatness? You could not believe the ardor that this has given me for the Charity* (CCD:I:323).

- **A grace that configures one to Christ:** *To be true Daughters of Charity you must do what the Son of God did when he was on earth... He worked constantly for His neighbor, visiting and healing the sick and instructing the ignorant for their salvation* (CCD:IX:14).

That gift, power, and grace, which is given to us with the charism of our vocation, configures us with Jesus Christ: adorer of the Father, servant of his loving plan, and evangelizer of those who are poor and, at the same time, leads us to provide for those who are in need

and enables us to be creative as we engage in a wide diversity of ministries:

So, the goal at which you must aim is to honor Our Lord Jesus Christ, serving Him in those who are poor, in children to honor His Infancy, in needy poor persons, such as the ones at the Nom-de-Jesus, and in those poor people you assisted when they came seeking refuge in Paris because of the wars. You see how you must be ready to serve persons who are poor, wherever you're sent: with the army, as you did when called there, with poor criminals and, generally speaking, wherever you can assist poor persons, since that is your purpose (CCD:X:104).

This diversity in the ministry of the Daughters enabled them to serve the poor in a more effective manner and also enabled them to reveal God's love to them. Those poor men and women are God's chosen people and therefore, during the time of Vincent as well as in later years, people have been excluded from our ministry precisely because they were not poor.

From the time of its origin the Daughters of Charity have attempted **to influence each specific historical situation in order to transform it** in accord with the loving plan of God. Through various activities the Sisters have proclaimed God's option for the poor. We recall here Barbe Angiboust, DC, defending the galley slaves who were mistreated and Jeanne Dalmagne, DC, denouncing to the authorities the injustices that were inflicted upon the poor in the village of Nanteuil. Such efforts to transform the reality has led the Sisters to be bold and creative in their service on behalf of the poor. They have grown as an international community, a process that was initiated during the time of our Founders when the Sisters were sent to Poland (1652).

4. The charism has been adapted to the changing needs of time

In the conferences that Vincent gave to the first Sisters, he placed before them an image that was a call to engage in a process of adaptation that was demanded of them by the passing of time. It was 1655 and the Company was growing. Every part of France and many places outside of France (for example, Poland) were calling for the services of the Sisters. In his conference on the Rule, Vincent stated:

*In the beginning it was a little snowball, and that Little Company has grown so much and made itself so pleasing to God that we can certainly say that **it's the finger of God that has produced this work** because it's spreading everywhere. Yes, Sisters, your name is extending to so many places that it has reached even Madagascar, where they're asking for you. Our priests there tell us it would be very desirable to have Sisters from your Company to win over more easily the souls of*

those poor Negroes. Ah, Dieu! Sisters, God is blessing your Company and, provided you're faithful to Him, He will continue to bless it (CCD:X:82-83).

Vincent utilized the powerful image of a snowball that rolls down the side of the mountain and grows in size because it gathers into itself the snow that is in its path. It seems to me that this is a call to adaptation. The snowball adapts and mixes with the snow that it finds in its path. In this manner new paths are opened and there is growth. That is what the Company has done throughout history and continues to do today.

The adaptation of the charism to the changing situation of the 18th century was carried out by the Superior General, Jean Bonnet (1711-1735), as well as by the Superioresses General who guided the Company during the time of Bonnet's term of office. The Company had grown and it became necessary to broaden the proper rule that had been given to the Sisters by the Founders. In order to strengthen the charism and provide adaptations that were necessary for their service, the Daughters established Provinces in France: in 1712, there were 14 provinces and, in 1718, 19 provinces. The international expansion had not begun and the number of provinces that has been cited refers to the provinces in France and in Poland (a country to which the Founders sent the Sisters).

Father Bonnet established guidelines for canonical and for regular visitation of the houses, for the convocation of the General Assembly every six years, Rules for the various roles of leadership in the Company (Superioress General, Director, Assistant, Treasurer, Steward, and Secretary). He outlined the themes that the Sisters were to use during the time of their annual and monthly retreats, developed a formation program for the Seminary Sisters and the young Sisters (a program based on the gospels and the life of Christ, the catechism of the Catholic Church, the biographies and the teachings of the Founders).

It was hoped that these adaptations would provide the Sisters with a solid formation, which would enable them to continue the mission of Jesus Christ, the servant and evangelizer of the poor, and which would also enable them to do what Jesus had done:

- To care for the infirm in their homes;
- To teach and to educate the children in the rural areas;
- To care for the sick in hospitals;
- To provide for and educate abandoned and orphaned children;
- To care for the galley slaves in prisons and hospitals;
- To provide for beggars;
- To care for the insane.

Various manuals were developed for those different ministries which in turn were intended to enable the Sisters to adapt themselves to distinct realities. What did Father Bonnet hope to achieve with this process of adaptation? In the Spanish translation of those manuals that are preserved in the Archives of the Daughters on the Canary Islands (the Daughters arrived there in 1829) two objectives are clearly stated:

(1) to maintain with renewed enthusiasm our fidelity to the charism of charitable service on behalf of the poor and

(2) to create an international dimension to the Company and to carry out ministry on behalf of the poor in these various places but to do so with common methods, methods that were experimented in France and that produced good results.

In May 1790, near the end of the 18th century, the Assistant General of the Company, Sister Jeanne David and a group of five Sisters from Spain who had been formed in Paris during a period of eight years, established the Company in Spain. This involved confronting many difficulties and misunderstandings. As a result of the firmness of the Sisters' convictions, the commitment of Sister David and the Sisters' fidelity to their charism, the Company in Spain began to grow and was focused on serving the more needy members of society.

The French Revolution had begun in France and that event would change the course of French history, bringing to an end the *ancien regime*. Through an order of the Revolutionary Government the Company was suppressed in 1792, but in those circumstances Sister Marie-Antoinette Deleau, the Superioress General, wrote a letter to the Sisters which reminded them about the power of their charism and called them to remain faithful to the aims of the Company: *Do not abandon service on behalf of the poor if you are not obliged to do so. Let us utilize all our resources in order to mitigate the misery that is so prevalent during these unfortunate days... Ask the civil administrators to pay for your first dress if they demand that you remove your habit. Since that is simply a civil law, we can obey it, but use simple and modest clothing that is becoming to Christian women... In a word, in order to continue to serve the poor, do everything that is demanded of you in the present circumstances as long as there is nothing that is contrary to religion, the church, and/or one's conscience.*⁴

Those words echo the words of Vincent who on 22 January 1645 stated: *Sisters, the service of the poor must be preferred to everything else* (CCD:IX:171). That is a principle that, throughout their history, has

⁴ *Génesis de la Compañía*, Hijas de Caridad, Casa Madre, Paris, 1968, Spanish edition, p. 40 [This booklet exists in English too].

guided the vocation and the mission of the Daughters of Charity in every part of the world. That same principle also justifies the various adaptations that were necessary in order to serve the poor.

The *Anales* of the Congregation of the Mission and of the Daughters of Charity has reported the heroic actions of many Sisters during the time of the French Revolution. About 4000 Sisters were dispersed and yet they found new ways to provide for the sick poor even though they were not dressed in their traditional habit and were unable to live together in community (many lived with some members of their family or in a hospital as a nurse). Many were persecuted and some were martyred (the Daughters in Arras and Angers and Blessed Sister Marguerite Rutan).⁵ At the same time, in Spain, the Company became established and consolidated through heroic gestures of service during the time of the French invasion (1808-1814), the yellow fever epidemic (1821), the cholera epidemics (1834, 1855, and 1885), and the three Carlist Wars of the 19th century. In the midst of those situations of great need, when the lives of many people were in danger, the Sisters were more than willing to go to the many places where the infirm were to be found. In order to do this they adapted their order of day, their style of community life, and many other aspects of their life as Daughters of Charity.

This same witness was repeated as the Sisters cared for those who were wounded during the Crimean War and as they traveled in ambulances where they treated countless soldiers, who were wounded during the wars in Europe, Asia, Africa, and America during the 19th and 20th centuries. A wonderful example of the adaptation of the charism in order to serve the poor effectively is revealed in the life of Blessed Sister Rosalie Rendu. She is one of the many Sisters whose heart was enflamed by a charity that enabled her to be bold as she provided for those who were in need. Her life echoed the words of Vincent: *we are to run to the spiritual needs of our neighbor as if we were running to a fire* (CCD:XI:25). Sister Rosalie did this in the midst of an institutional context that did not promote adaptation. During the time of Father Jean-Baptiste Étienne (1843-1874), uniformity became sacred and any attempt with regard to adaptation was viewed as an attack on fidelity to the charism. That reality created certain conflicts between the Superior General and some Missionaries and Provincial Superiors in various countries, one of which was Spain.⁶

⁵ PONCIANO NIETO, C.M., *Historia de las Hijas de la Caridad*, 2 volumes, Imprenta Regina, Madrid, 1932, pp. 151-154.

⁶ This theme has been researched and studied by EDWARD R. UDOVIC, C.M. in his work, *Jean-Baptiste Étienne and the Vincentian Revival*, Vincentian Studies Institute, 2001.

We must be mindful of the fact that throughout the 18th century rationalism slowly penetrated the Church and also the Company. The Circular Letters of the Superioress General that were addressed to the Daughters at the beginning of each new year warned the Sisters about certain practices that were weakening the charism: a lack of poverty, unnecessary travel, a worldly spirit, reading for relaxation and distraction, visiting women and other persons who are not poor, lack of fraternal charity, lack of dedication and commitment with regard to serving the poor. In many ways there seemed to be an environment of general laxity.

These same warnings appear in the message that the Blessed Virgin expressed to Saint Catherine Labouré when she was gifted with the Miraculous Medal (1830). The direct intervention of the Blessed Mother and the powerful authority of the Superior General, Father Étienne, put an end to that relaxed attitude. The year 1830 marked a return of the Company to its primitive spirit. Marian devotion through the Miraculous Medal, the renewal of service on behalf of the poor, the availability of all the Sisters for said service, and fidelity in obedience and fidelity to the norms established by Father Étienne resulted in a flourishing of vocations and a great missionary expansion throughout the world.

The central government of the Daughters outlined a path of renewal that involved a solid formation that was focused on fidelity to the charism. At the time that the *Anales* began to be published in France, Saint Vincent's conferences were edited and immediately translated into Spanish (1943). The Superiors General were insistent in their call to conversion as well as in their call to carry out their ministry in accord with the various Manuals that were developed in the Motherhouse, in other words, to minister in conformity with the manner that was done in France.⁷ All of this resulted in a strong current of uniformity and all the local communities were expected in act in said manner. This reality maintained and provided the Company with a high level of missionary expansion and apostolic vitality that was based on caring for the poor, fidelity to the spiritual life, and the observance of the Rule. That situation continued until the time of the Second Vatican Council, a time when the Company had reached its numerical high point: more than 45,000 members.

In contrast to the sacred position in which uniformity was held from the time of Father Étienne until the 20th century, we have the person

⁷ Father Jean-Baptiste Étienne together with the Superioress General revised, adapted, and completed the Rules for the various roles of leadership in the Company, the *Manuals* for the different forms of ministry that the Sisters were engaged in and the Constitutions of the Company. This work of renewal produced many fruits.

of Most Honored Mother, Suzanne Guillemin (1962-1968), who was Mother General for only six years but who, nevertheless, put the Company on the path of conversion as she encouraged the members to make the necessary adaptations that were being demanded by the Council. In 1966, she warned: *Let us beware of becoming mediocre, established in this world and of this world, unconsciously unfaithful souls.*⁸ In her Circular Letter of 1967 she affirmed: *We are now at the hour when all that lives in the Church must renew itself or die.*⁹ In light of that principle and in accord with the demands that the Council has placed upon Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (*Perfectae Caritatis*), the Company sought to engage in a process of adaptation and attempted to return to her roots.

Fifty years have passed since the closing of the Second Vatican Council. The world has changed rapidly and the humanist mentality has been replaced by individualism, indifference, and a cult of efficiency and technology. These attitudes have penetrated the Church and the Company as a "spiritual worldliness."¹⁰ The number of vocations has declined rapidly and membership in the Company continues to decrease. Once again we are called to conversion and to a renewed hope as expressed in the theme of our recent General Assembly: *The boldness of charity for a new missionary momentum.* This is a call to live in a state of conversion and to adapt the charism to the present time.

5. Significant elements of the charism

We return to Châtillon in order to recall the significant elements that defined the charism of the first Confraternity of Charity, the Confraternities that were established in subsequent years, and that then came to define the charism of the Daughters of Charity. In Châtillon, there was a **movement of compassion**, fruit of the Holy Spirit, that moved hearts. At the beginning of the Company, there was a **movement of compassion** determined by the shortcomings of the Confraternities of Charity and the needs of the poor. That movement touched the heart of Marguerite Naseau, which in turn set in motion a process of formation, a movement of apostolic action, and a willingness to serve the sick poor and to lay down one's life as a martyr of charity (CCD:IX:64-66).

⁸ Circular Letters (1966-1968) of Most Honored Mother S. Guillemin [Translator's Note: I received a copy of this work from the Archivist of the Daughters of Charity. It is not dated and no publisher is listed]. The above-referenced text is taken from the Circular Letter of 1 January 1966 and is found on p. 10.

⁹ This text is taken from the Circular Letter of 1 January 1967 and is found on p. 36 of the book cited in footnote # 8.

¹⁰ Pope FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, ## 93-97.

The same movement of compassion touched the heart of Vincent, who sent Louise de Marillac to visit the Confraternities in order to help the members provide better service to those in need and who also proposed that Marguerite Naseau be sent from Villepreux to Paris so that Louise could supervise her ministry on behalf of the poor (CCD:IX:194).

Moved by compassion, Louise began to visit the Confraternities and establish schools to instruct the young girls in the various towns and villages. For many years she continued to visit the Confraternities and during that time organized the service that was provided to those persons in need and also formed new servants of the poor. Moved by compassion, Louise felt that the time had come to gather together in community the servants of the poor and, thus, founded the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

Another significant element of the charism is a **spirituality** that enables one to be faithful to one's baptismal commitment and also enables one to follow Jesus Christ through the cultivation of the virtues of humility, simplicity, and charity. Those three virtues are a synthesis of the Beatitudes, the gospel program presented by Jesus Christ that enables men and women to follow in his footsteps and make the Kingdom of God present in their midst. That element was made clear in the Rule of the Confraternity in Châtillon:

They will take care in practicing humility, simplicity, and charity, each deferring to her companion and to others, performing all their actions for the charitable intention of persons who are poor and with no human respect (CCD:XIIIb:19).

With the same force, but with greater urgency, that same element was transferred to the Company:

As long as charity, humility, and simplicity exist among you, one may say, "The Company of Charity is still alive"... the day when charity, humility, and simplicity are no longer seen in the Company, the poor Company of Charity will be dead; yes, it will be dead (CCD:IX:467-468).

Another key element of the charism of charity is the **responsible and committed organization** of the members of the Confraternity with regard to their service on behalf of the poor.¹¹ Thus Vincent wrote various Rules for the different types of Confraternities which he established. When the responsibility and the commitment of the laity began to weaken, the Holy Spirit inspired the establishment of the Company of the Daughters of Charity. Vincent was firm about the purpose of

¹¹ JOSÉ MARÍA ROMÁN, *St. Vincent de Paul: A Biography*, translated by Sr. Joyce Howard, DC, Melisende, London, 1999, pp. 448, 571 ff.

that institution, namely, the service of Christ in the person of those men and women who are poor. At the same time Vincent was very flexible with regard to the manner in which those persons would be served. Vincent applied different solutions and wrote different Rules in order to satisfy the various needs of the poor. This was true with regard to both the Confraternities and the Daughters.

There is a fourth significant element with regard to the charism: **warmth and the quality of service that is offered** (cf. CCD:X:390-402 and the many other references to cordiality). Warmth means reaching out to others, putting a smile on one's face, being kind and sensitive, being zealous and observant. All of these qualities are mentioned at different times in the Rules for the members of the Confraternities and for the Daughters of Charity (for example, the Rules provide many details with regard to the respect, cordiality, and the necessary competency in ministering to the poor). This is a key element in the charism of serving the poor. Throughout history we have had a high regard for this element because it is only in this way that we can discover the presence of Christ in the person of the poor and the destitute. The Sisters have been challenged to acquire the necessary competency in order to carry out their service on behalf of the poor with warmth and in a qualitative manner.

The historian, José María Roman, C.M., described and commented on the establishment of the Confraternities of Charities and stated: *it was thanks to the charities that the Church could be mother to the destitute.*¹² The Founder was convinced that **God was the only originator of the Confraternities and of the Company**. Vincent was equally convinced of the fact that **his charism was a gift for the Church and a great benefit for the poor**. He frequently repeated those words because he wanted those ideas to become firmly rooted in the heart of his disciples and followers (CCD:IX:358, 471, 536).

6. The challenges that our Vincentian heritage presents to us today

The same spirit that anointed Jesus as he was sent forth to proclaim good news to the poor led his disciples to continue that saving work among the most abandoned members of society. From the perspective of that fundamental conviction of Vincent de Paul, certain challenges are placed before us. We live in a world that lacks spirituality but where selfishness and individualism abound. In light of this situation the Vincentian heritage challenges us to intensify our efforts at developing our spirituality and also challenges us to reaffirm the Christian and Vincentian identity of true servants of the poor.

¹² ROMAN, *op. cit.*, p. 445.

A Daughter of Charity cannot be defined by the ministries that she exercises in some school or hospital or residence or social agency. Daughters of Charity can be defined only in terms of who they are: women of faith who follow Jesus Christ: Adorer of the Father, Servant of his loving plan, Evangelizer of those who are poor. The Daughters, through the total surrender of their lives, have an undivided love for Jesus and serve him in the person of the poor. This defining difference with regard to their identity has to be rooted in the faith and in the joy with which they live out their vocation.

In the midst of a world of superficiality, individualism, and the search for efficiency, in the midst of the absence of God and an over-all indifference, the Daughters are called to be witnesses of God's mercy and tenderness, especially as they reach out to and serve those men and women who are poor. In 1830 the members of the Company renewed themselves as a result of the rediscovery of the spirituality that had been handed down to them by their Founders. This renewal brought about a unity and a willingness to serve that was made manifest in a twofold manner: obedience and going forth to serve those persons in need (even when that involved going out beyond one's own country of origin). We have in our hands the same resources that continue to be valid in the present era and that continue to provide us with the boldness of charity for a new missionary momentum.

The challenges that we must respond to can be stated in the following manner:

- To live a **Trinitarian** spirituality that is rooted in God's mercy and that, in turn, allows us to live a common life in service of the mission.

- To deepen our faith so that it reflects an **incarnational** spirituality that is centered on the person and enables us to approach people with the tenderness of Christ.

- To continue to develop a **transformational** spirituality that sends us forth to the peripheries, places us beside the poor and puts us in a position that enables us to oppose the causes of poverty.

- To deepen a spirituality of **grace** that enables us to carry out our service as a vocation and as a gift.

- To develop a spirituality of **communion** that enables us to accept the laity as a gift while at the same time promoting their formation and their participation in the charism so that they might serve the poor in a more effective manner and so that they might also respond to the call to go out to the peripheries.

- To enter into a process of personal and community **discernment** so that in light of the gospel and the charism we might make options that can better the life of those who are poor.

– To cultivate a **paschal** sense of our vocation that provides us with the strength and hope to confront our own suffering and the suffering of our brothers and sisters, especially the suffering of the poor and the more needy members of society.

– To view the **Eucharist** as the center of our life and mission so that we might continue to serve our sisters and brothers who are poor.

To express the **tenderness** of the divine mercy in a way that enables us to value “the little ones” and the more vulnerable members of our society.

In this way we respond to the Spirit who calls us today to be credible witnesses of the infinite mercy of Jesus. Yes, we are to give such witness to those who are poor and we are to do so from the perspective of the joy of the gospel and from the perspective of evangelical poverty that leads us to share all that we are and all that we have with those who are most in need.

Translated: CHARLES T. PLOCK, C.M.

The Saint Vincent de Paul Society in the Vincentian Family

Michael Thio

International President

The Vincentian Family is preparing to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the birth of its charism which, throughout the years, has allowed the members of the various branches to serve the poor in every part of the world. Therefore, we want to express our gratitude to the editors of *Vincentiana* for offering us the opportunity to speak about our ministry within the overall context of the Vincentian Family. We know that *Vincentiana* is a well-known publication especially because of its reflections on Vincentian spirituality. At the same time we know that other persons, not related to the Vincentian Family, often use this publication during their research. For this reason I begin by explaining the concept of the Vincentian Family and then, I explain the manner in which the members of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society belong to that Family and finally, I present our objectives and some of the highlights of our ministry during recent years.

In the article, *The Vincentian Family: An Overall View*, written by José Ignacio Fernández de Mendoza, C.M., it is stated that an institution is in some way a member of the Vincentian Family if it has one or more of the characteristics listed below:

- directly founded by St. Vincent de Paul;
- wholly adopted or in some way adapted the *Common Rules* of St. Vincent;
- honor St. Vincent as their patron or primary source of inspiration; assume particular aspects of the Vincentian charism;
- profess the same spirit as the Congregation of the Mission or the Company of the Daughters of Charity;
- participate at their very core in the vocation of St. Vincent de Paul, which consists in following Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor;
- assume as their own the spirit of simplicity, humility, and charity;
- are affiliated with the Congregation of the Mission or the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

Father then states *that in a family of this nature two complimentary [sic] factors are united... on the one hand, a common origin and a common ministry and, on the other hand, a plurality of persons and institutions.*

We must be mindful of the fact that at the present time the ministry of the Vincentian Family is not limited to one country or, for that matter, to one continent. The Family is ministering in almost every part of the world. There is also no doubt that the Vincentian Family has been affected by the globalization syndrome (affected in the fullest sense of that reality).

The members of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society are proud to state that they are members of the Vincentian Family and have accepted the responsibility that results from such membership which began at the time when one of our primary founders, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam (1813-1853), dreamed of *establishing a worldwide network of charity*.

The objectives of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society

From the time of its establishment in 1833, the Society has placed itself under the patronage of Saint Vincent de Paul. The members of the Society continue to live and to pass on to others the Vincentian spirit. The vocation of the members is rooted in two primary principles: continual prayer (deepening of one's faith) and an encounter with Christ through an encounter with those men and women who are poor. These principles impel the members to serve the less fortunate members of society and to do so with great respect, regardless of their ethnic or religious affiliation.

Historically, the focus of the ministry of the Society is home visitation: at the time of its foundation, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam (the primary co-founder) and his companions reached out to the poor by visiting them in their homes throughout the city of Paris. Today, the members of the Society reach out to those persons who are in need wherever they might be found: in their own homes, on the streets of our cities, in shelters for the homeless, in hospitals, in prisons.

The ministry of the Society is always focused on the practice of charity. The members minister in the areas where they live and respond to local needs. The manner in which such charity is practiced is quite varied and can involve the members in health care, farming, education, housing, professional development, providing assistance to the elderly, the disabled, the lonely, and those excluded from participation in society in any way. As a result of donations, we are also able to provide assistance in times of emergency. In other words, we are able to help the victims of natural disasters. At the same time, we are also able to engage in projects that advance the financial development of people.

What is a conference?

A "conference" of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society is the basic unit of the Society. A conference is constituted by a group of about 10-15 members. The individual conferences function in an autonomous

manner but are coordinated by a council (local, regional, national) that is proper to the structure of each country. The members meet regularly (once or twice a month) in order to pray together, to plan and discuss their ministry on behalf of those persons who are poor. Usually each conference has a relationship with a Catholic parish.

There are about 51,000 conferences throughout the world and more than 780,000 members in 150 countries where the Society is present.

Structure of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society

The International General Council is the highest administrative body of the Society on an international level. From the time of its establishment (1833), the headquarters of this Council has been located in Paris, France; its leaders are volunteers who are supported by a team of employees.

The General Council binds together the individual member countries of the International Confederation of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society. The mission of the Council is to support the ministry of the Conferences throughout the world. It fosters the exchange of news and the formation of leaders and provides the various conferences with tools that enable them to establish and strengthen their bonds of solidarity. Furthermore, it promotes the sharing of resources between members residing in rich and poor countries. The General Council also organizes international gatherings that bring together the member countries. The Council also takes responsibility for planning those international gatherings.

As the highest administrative body of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, the General Council is responsible for gathering together, analyzing, and compiling the information that is received from each country or zone. This task enables the Council to publish reports that enable the members to understand the manner in which the ministry of the Society has evolved. Those reports also allow the Society to plan its worldwide strategy.

Finally, the General Council is the guarantor of the International Rule that governs the Society and is responsible for the integration of the new Conferences, which are established every year in different parts of the world.

Since 2010 I have served as President of the International General Council of the Society and the Council has focused on ten strategic objectives:

GOAL 01: Enhance the spiritual formation and development of members. This is fundamental to our Vincentian vocation and mission.

GOAL 02: Leadership and members' formation, training, and development to provide for quality and enlightened leaders and members.

GOAL 03: Continue to enhance the internationalization of the Society as a global Catholic charity. Extend the Society to new countries, expand the scope and quality of the Society's services to the poor and needy. Work together to foster systemic change.

GOAL 04: To develop effective communication and to promote better understanding and knowledge of the Society's ministry and activities (internally and externally).

GOAL 05: To better focus on youth and young adults' active involvement and to provide them with every opportunity for participation in the growth, leadership, and well-being of the Society.

GOAL 06: To be involved in greater collaboration with other branches of the Vincentian Family in mutually beneficial projects and programs for the poor and needy.

GOAL 07: In the spirit of the Church's ecumenical and interfaith dialogue and activities, we will collaborate with other Catholic and Christian organizations in the works of charity and justice.

GOAL 08: Maintain close and strong relationships with the hierarchy, thus giving witness to the reality that we are all part of the one mystical Body of Christ, the Church.

GOAL 09: Evolve a strategic plan to respond to and address worldwide calamities (providing emergency relief assistance, accompanying people in the recovery phase, and in the reconstruction phase of peoples' lives).

GOAL 10: Governance within the CGI (internally and externally) and interaction with National Councils.

Strategic Plan and recent activities

The goals that were just cited are accomplished through a strategic plan that places responsibility on different individuals. This plan also has controls and is continually evaluated.

Each year, in accord with our strategic plan, we submit a report of our activities. Here I would like to highlight just a few of those activities that the Society engaged in during the past year.

International Commission for Assistance and Development

This Commission (composed of members from the General Council) contributes to the international relief and reconstruction efforts in time of emergency (some natural disaster). In addition this Commission is also involved in the following efforts: micro-finance projects, educational projects, providing housing for the homeless and refugees.

Emergency Relief Efforts

The Society has provided assistance to more than 22 countries during times of earthquakes, flooding, typhoons, hurricanes, war, civil and political unrest, epidemics, and famine. More specifically, we provided assistance during flooding in Brazil, Burundi, Bolivia, Croatia, Zimbabwe, Bangladesh, Tonga, and the Solomon Islands; during times of war in Syria, Iraq, Gaza, and the Central African Republic; during times of earthquakes and typhoons in Chile, Nicaragua, and the Philippines; during the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone; providing assistance to refugees in Uganda and Lebanon. The Society has assured the availability of drinking water, food, clothing, blankets, medical supplies, provisional shelters (tents), heating and cooking units, kitchen supplies, furniture for homes.

Reconstruction Projects

These efforts have involved repair and construction of houses in the Philippines, Zimbabwe, and Burundi. Other projects have included educational and counseling services that have enabled people to become active participants in the life of their community.

Development Projects

It is most important to promote systemic change wherever possible, because in doing so we enable the less fortunate members of society to become self-sufficient and, therefore, independent. These projects are intended to enhance the dignity of the human person and to allow families to live together with dignity and meaning.

Our projects have included the following:

- education, food programs, collaboration programs, micro-financing programs (Haiti);
- agricultural development (Peru);
- education and professional formation (Guinea-Bissau);
- scholarships (Turkey and Botswana);
- agricultural programs (Mozambique).

United Nations - Economic and Social Council

The Society is an accredited NGO at the United Nations with a presence in New York and Geneva. UNESCO is headquartered in Paris. Our representatives participate in meetings and work in close collaboration with the other UN representatives of the Vincentian Family. The Society wants to strengthen its presence in order to further develop

its role at the UN. Our representatives have participated in various meetings in New York and Geneva, as well as in Paris during meetings of UNESCO.

Conclusion

Faithful to its calling and living the gospel of faith, hope, and charity, the Vincentian Family continues the service of Christ as its members serve those persons who are poor and in need. By becoming involved in the cause of those who are poor we promote Christian action and virtue. We also give witness to Christ.

As Christians and Vincentians we ought to preserve and develop our spirituality in order to maintain our relationship with Christ. By living a good Christian life we call people to conversion and draw them closer to God, while giving witness to Christ's love and goodness.

We give thanks to God for the 400 years during which people have given witness to our charism and we give thanks to God because we know that this charism has inspired, enlightened, and blessed the Vincentian Family as its members minister for the greater glory of God.

*May God be gracious to us and bless us;
may God's face shine upon us.*

Psalm 67:2

Translated: CHARLES T. PLOCK, C.M.

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

Yasmine Cajuste

Former International President of the VMY

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!

Miraculous Medal Association

Carl L. Pieber, C.M.

*Deputy Director General
International Miraculous Medal Association*

Introduction

James Foley, beheaded by the Islamic State (ISIS) on 20 August 2012 was a journalist and poet. He once wrote:

“Drop a pebble in the water: just a splash, and it is gone; but there’s half-a-hundred ripples circling on and on and on, spreading, spreading from the center, flowing on out to the sea. And there is no way of telling where the end is going to be.”

I quote this poem, because it so fittingly speaks about the Miraculous Medal, the Association, and the Charism of St. Vincent de Paul. What ripple effect could a medal made in the image of Mary Immaculate have, in a city, or France, or the world? Yet what was initially called the Medal of Our Lady of Grace became the peoples’ “miraculous medal” by 1836, and by 2015, established national associations in 45 countries with millions of people wearing that medal.

The story of that medal rings in the heart of every Vincentian as another indication of God’s blessings on the Double Family at first and subsequently the foundation of multiple organizations following the charism of service and of love of the poor of St. Vincent de Paul. Certainly the special love that Mary stated she had for Vincent and the two Congregations, the wearing of the medal by thousands, and their questions as to its origins with the poor, could imply that this medal had a positive effect on spreading Vincent’s charism to begin more foundations and communities of love and service to the poor.

For the medal, as stated by its first wearers, changed their hearts (conversion) and increased their faith (evangelization). We, who claim the charism of St. Vincent, must wear this medal of conversion and evangelization. With this medal, the poor can recognize immediately our conversion and evangelization, then look to us to love and then to serve them, St. Vincent’s charism.

The history of the Miraculous Medal and its Association starts with a French sister, a Daughter of Charity, in Paris, France, in 1830. Because many may not know this, I briefly summarize it here. If you are familiar with the story of the Miraculous Medal, please page forward to the next part of this article the *Miraculous Medal Association and the Charism of St. Vincent de Paul*.

Story of the Miraculous Medal

Zoe Labouré was born on 2 May 1806, a French farm girl. When she was 23-years old, she entered the Catholic group of women called the Daughters of Charity, in January 1830. Three months later she became a formal member entering their seminary with the name Catherine.

Catherine Labouré received the Miraculous Medal from Mary, the Mother of God, in the summer and fall of 1830 during two apparitions. The first apparition to St. Catherine Labouré happened on the night of 18 July 1830.

Sleeping in the roof dormitory with the other young sisters, she was awakened around 11 pm by a young child of about five years of age, dressed in white. "Come, get up" said the child holding a lit candle. "Mary is waiting for you in the Chapel." Calling Catherine three different times to get up, Catherine noticed that none of the other sisters were awake. Yet the light around the child was bright and vivid. Hurriedly dressing, Catherine, followed the child down the wooden, circular staircase. She saw that all the candles on the walls were aglow with light. When she arrived at the Chapel, it was radiantly lit and reminded her of Midnight Mass.

The child took her to the priest-Director's chair in the front of the sanctuary. Soon she heard the rustling like that of a silk dress in a breeze, and there before her was the Blessed Mother. Sitting in the chair, Mary placed Catherine's hands on her lap. They spoke for two hours.

In this conversation, the Blessed Mother told Catherine many things of which I will point out two that are important for us. Mary told Catherine that God had a special mission for her. And then Mary said that she herself had a special love for the two Congregations of St. Vincent de Paul, who take special care of her children, the poor.

The second apparition of the Blessed Mother to Catherine Labouré happened on the evening of 27 November 1830. There are two parts to this apparition.

That evening, while Catherine was at evening prayer with the other sisters, Mary appeared to her in the Chapel in Paris. The other sisters did not see the Blessed Mother but knew something was happening from the great light that appeared in the Chapel.

Catherine states that Mary first appeared holding a globe. Appearing in a white gown and veil. Mary said that this Globe represented the whole world for whom she constantly pleaded to God for help.

Sanctified by His Redemption, the globe represents the Mystical Body of her Son Jesus Christ, whom she gives to God as she gave Jesus Christ to the world. The world still wanting, Mary gives this body to God pleading for his grace and aid to all who ask her for help.

From this apparition Mary takes the title Virgin Most Powerful or in Latin, Virgo Potens. She is our eternal and most perfect model of life in and with God.

In the second part of this apparition of 27 November 1830, when Catherine looked up again, Mary is seen as she is in the Miraculous Medal today. This is sometimes called the third apparition.

She stood on the world crushing the head of Satan, the devil, reminding us of the verse in Genesis 3:15 – “I will put enmity between you and the woman, between her seed (Jesus Christ) and yours. She will crush your head and you will lie in wait for her heal.”

During this second part of the apparition, Catherine saw around her the words of the famous Miraculous Medal prayer: “O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee.”

The glow around her became streams of light from some of her fingers. “These are the graces that flow to people who have asked for God’s favor,” Mary said. “Those fingers where there is no light, represent graces that no one has asked for from God. *Come to the foot of the altar and with confidence* and ask God, through my intercession, for these graces.”

And as Mary turned, Catherine saw the cross coming up from the large M representing Mary at the foot of the cross. Underneath this were the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Around this were 12 stars representing the 12 apostles and the 12 tribes of Israel.

Mary then commanded Catherine, “Have a medal struck in this image. Give this medal to everyone. For all who wear this blessed medal around their neck, shall receive special graces eternally from God through me.”

In 1832, over a thousand medals were struck and promoted. By 1836 over a million medals were being worn by faithful devotees of Mary. As the people proclaimed, “This is a Miraculous Medal. For when they wear it, they are healed and changed, sometimes physically and always spiritually.” And so the associations started of those who wore the medal. The formalization of these associations into one Association came in the document, *Dilectus Filius* (Beloved Son) signed by Pope St. Pius X and dated 8 July 1909.

Reflection on the Apparitions

Today, Mary commands us to come to this altar too. The use of the word “altar” can also be a symbol of the Holy Mass, where Mary’s flesh and blood, her Son, Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection are celebrated. We too are called to offer ourselves to God at Mass, and there ask God through her, for what we need. “Come to the altar” should

remind us of the most important command given to us by Mary which was at the Wedding Feast in Cana, (Jn 2:5) "Do what he tells you."

Through Mary, all of humanity said "yes" to God entering into their life (just as Adam and Eve's "no" represented all of humanity). Mary never said "no" to God and God never says "no" to her. Her pleading is always answered.

That is why Mary is considered the most powerful of all human persons. Of all the women before her, of all the women who came after her, even of all the women who will come after us, God chose HER – Mary. This then is truly a singular and extraordinary person who, with the fullness of God, is most powerful for us and our intercession. Her response to being chosen, her "yes" at the Annunciation, began the redemption of her son Jesus Christ.

The Charism of St. Vincent de Paul and the Miraculous Medal Association

The challenge of our Association is living Mary's commands to us that encompass the charism of St. Vincent de Paul – "Come to the foot of the Altar." Go to Mass; pray! And God will convert you and evangelize you to the poor.

That conversion means first we must be emptied of our self so that God can act on others through us. It is the Mass that empties us or converts us to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, making us poor, like Mary and Jesus. Only then, bereft of self, can we begin to love the poor and serve them. Our hearts are changed.

Secondly, Mary commanded us to "Give this medal to all. For they who wear it will receive many blessings." Only the wearers can be evangelizers, those who bring good news to the poor. Just touching or feeling the medal gives one the strength of God's zeal for the poor.

This is a zeal born from the heart and love as shown by Mary's open arms on the medal. These open arms beg to embrace the person. These open arms remind us of the divine, incarnate love for each of us alone. This is unconquerable, invincible love.

Armed with this medal, with such love, every poor person we meet is loved and exalted. There is no poor person that we cannot love and serve. Wear the medal lest you are repulsed by the poor!

Recently in November 2014, at the International Miraculous Medal Association Assembly, the members from all over the world reflected on this challenge, especially in the light of "Vincentianism" – love of the poor. From their prayer and reflection they wrote the following statement that encapsulates what was said above:

"The Miraculous Medal is a great evangelizing and transforming force for all who wear it with faith. To come to the foot of the altar,

to receive the abundance of the graces of God through Mary, fortifies us in a world hungry for justice and mercy.”

Since 1909, we, the members of the Miraculous Medal Association, consciously aware of Mary as our Mother, promote Mary’s request to St. Catherine Labouré in 1830 – to wear this medal of her image. With this gift of God through Mary, we give the medal as ministry to all, especially the poor, the sick, the thirsty, the hungry, the naked, the oppressed, the imprisoned, and all who seek the Kingdom of God (Mt 25:31-46). The fruits of this ministry, that is, the deeper love of God experienced in the poor, evangelize us to receive God more fully, thus impelling creativity in our ministry unto infinity.”

The Association understands its mission not only to the poor but to the other members of the Vincentian Family. It is the medal that calls them to collaborate, work, and bring the unique ministry of the medal, that is prayer, to whatever project or mission is presented to help the poor. The Association itself has many ministries to the poor ranging from prayer to visitations to food pantries to name a few.

The “modern day” offers great challenges to the Association. The secularization of the world draws people away from Mary as unnecessary to life and salvation. Prayer is deemed useless and meaningless repetition. The technicalization of the world, from cell phones to social media, makes people long for instant gratification in an impersonal meeting or encounter. Even the poor have cell phones as a sign of their human dignity.

In the face of such opposition the Association looks to its Mother as it should for help. The story of the beloved Alphonse Ratisbonne, whose conversion from Judaism to Catholicism through the Miraculous Medal, compels them to believe the work of their Mother Mary.

Imbued with this strength they must bring the people of resources and the poor they serve to the open arms of Mary, the front of their Medal. Only there can the conversion happen and the evangelization begin.

As the closing words of their common statement so eloquently put it, they will never tire or quit as they grow deeper in the love of Mary who sends them to the poor. It is there that they become filled with the Holy Spirit. Thus as their Mother Mary told them, “Come to the foot of the Altar and be filled with the Graces of God through my intercession.” Full of the Holy Spirit the Association gives life to the poor and Christ to the world.

“O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee.”

Lay Vincentian Missionaries and Vincentian Spirituality

César A. Saldaña Moreno

International President of MISEVI

*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!*¹

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,

¹ 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 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.

Translated by: CHARLES T. PLOCK, C.M.

The Way in Which the Brothers CMM Branch of the Vincentian Family is Inspired by, Lives, and Adapts the Vincentian Charism

Brothers CMM

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND BROTHERS CMM

When the Congregation of the Brothers of Our Lady, Mother of Mercy (Brothers CMM) was founded, Saint Vincent became its patron saint and an inspiring example of evangelical service. For more than 170 years the Brothers CMM have been working in several countries in the fields of education, youth work, and in building up the Church community. Their attention is especially focused on the poor and on youth growing up under difficult circumstances.

The Congregation of the Brothers CMM was founded in 1844 in Tilburg, the Netherlands. The founder, Bishop Joannes Zwijsen, was deeply moved by the poverty he encountered in this quickly growing industrial town and in the countryside around it. Many children received hardly any schooling and there were only limited means to help the sick, the elderly, the orphans, and those who were handicapped. To alleviate this situation Zwijsen gathered a group of sisters (1832) and a group of brothers (1844) around him: religious who were eager to dedicate themselves to improve the living conditions in the town and to do this as religious congregations in the Catholic Church.

Zwijsen bestowed on both of his congregations a name related to mercy. They are called Sisters of Our Lady, Mother of Mercy and Brothers of Our Lady, Mother of Mercy. Popularly they are referred to as Sisters of Charity (SCMM) and Brothers of Tilburg (CMM). Zwijsen was very successful in this effort since his congregations attracted many members. Around 1850, there were already nearly 1000 sisters and more than 100 brothers engaged in numerous educational, social, and Church projects. These initiatives were mostly to assist the poor and to support Catholic education, projects which Zwijsen called 'works of charity,' 'works of mercy.' The history of the brothers stretches over a period of 170 years. In total, there have been more than 3800 brothers.

Joannes Zwijsen (1794-1877), son of a miller of Kerkdriel, a village in the center of the Netherlands, was a passionate and idealistic person.

At a time when the Catholic faith was suppressed, he asked to be ordained a priest. Being an enterprising man, he became in time one of the major organizers in the rebuilding of the Dutch Church. And this even more so when he was consecrated a bishop in 1842 and appointed archbishop. He played a pivotal role at the time of the restoration of the Dutch hierarchy in 1853.

He had an extensive personal network, which included a number of ecclesiastical as well as political contacts and many business connections. On top of it he was a close friend of the Dutch Kings William I and William II and had friendly relations with a large number of government ministers. Fully in accordance with the spirit of his time, Zwijsen grew into a 'Prince of the Church,' ruling the Dutch Catholic Church from his residence near Den Bosch. He was an influential bishop, admired all over Europe.

In his 'Tilburg period' (1832-1855), Zwijsen was appalled by the poverty, the illiteracy, and the spiritual negligence of the youth in this up and coming industrial town and took drastic measures: he forbade First Holy Communion to children lacking acceptable schooling. From the point of view of the Church, this may have been a dubious directive, but it surely had a major impact on the local population. What actually happened was that child labour decreased, while school attendance increased. Zwijsen was inspired by a powerful vision to create a better world, a world in which the weak person was not abandoned or neglected, but fully taken into account. In his eyes all people had the responsibility to commit themselves to merciful action. In the needy person they would encounter the person of Christ. That was something in which he fully believed, and with that inspiration Zwijsen knew how to motivate other people to start working. But Zwijsen was not just a visionary. Level-headed and acting efficiently, he built up the required networks and knew how to realize many of his ideals. In his eyes, mercy was also a matter of good organization. Zwijsen had great admiration for Saint Vincent de Paul, whom he took as his role model. He gave his Congregation Mary, under the title 'Mother of Mercy,' as patron saint. As second patron saint he gave Saint Vincent de Paul, whose work for the poor, the ignorant, and the distressed in 17th century France was inspired by merciful love. Zwijsen, like Vincent, *saw* the suffering, *was moved* by it, and *got into action*, having the courage to roll up his sleeves and do the needed work of fighting illiteracy and poverty. One of Zwijsen's beloved expressions was: "*In order to succeed, you just have to start working.*" He was not only a strong-willed bishop, but also a pioneer in the fields of education and social health projects, and a prophet of mercy as well. It is understandable that he was called therefore the 'Vincentius of Tilburg.'

Immediately after the foundation of the Congregation, Zwijsen received invitations to start communities of brothers and schools in

other towns. He could not immediately respond to such requests; there were hardly any brothers and the financial means were scarce. The bishop waited until the Congregation had a few dozen members before he opened a new community in the Belgian city of Maaseik. That was in 1851, barely seven years after the foundation of the Congregation.

Zwijzen and the brothers took on all types of work. At that time they spoke of 'works of charity' and 'works of mercy.' Within the first ten years they started a center for orphans and began teaching children in neglected parts of town; they also initiated a boarding school, a Roman Catholic commercial school, seminary training for the priesthood, a teacher training school, an institute for blind and deaf children, a few Sunday schools, and a number of Catholic organizations for leisure activities. Besides all that, they established, together with the orphans, a printing press, a cobbler's workshop, and a tailoring shop. The printing press was initially intended to provide job training and jobs for the orphans, but over time it became a superb publishing house for school books and religious publications.

All these initiatives were, in a broad sense, considered works of mercy. They were launched in the course of the first ten years, and all were intended to improve the living conditions of large groups of people.

Thus, the brothers did not hesitate to undertake quite different types of work, even though the main emphasis of their mission was indeed on the education and the training of youth. Through the writing and publication of theoretical and practical teaching materials, the Brothers CMM had a great impact on general instruction and religious education in the Netherlands. Particularly impressive was the speed with which the Congregation spread across the Netherlands and Belgium.

MERCY BEYOND ALL BORDERS

The Brothers CMM established foundations also in Dutch-speaking territories overseas, such as in the Dutch Antilles in 1885, in Suriname 1902, and in Indonesia 1923. After World War II still other houses were added in Dutch and Belgian cities, until – as a consequence of missions in new countries and also due to a crisis in religious life – a gradual reduction of the CMM membership and influence came about. Taking everything together, it may be said that, after a few generations, the Brothers CMM managed a large Catholic educational network and also a number of boarding schools with different specializations.

The focus of the brothers was on education as a work of charity. Some initiatives were specifically directed toward the youth of the upper-classes, such as the boarding school Ruwenberg, but the brothers always applied the rule of founder Zwijzen that "the number of

children from poorer families should be at least as large as children from well-to-do families." Furthermore, they were not merely thinking about the possibility of making 'poor schools' possible by having 'rich schools,' but they also aimed at a certain balance between different kinds of apostolate. The work of the brothers did not exclude the wealthy parts of the population, "however, the greater part of those benefitting from our initiatives should be the poor," Zwijsen always said.

After half a century, the Congregation had already more than 500 brothers, living in some 20 communities. And after CMM had been around for a century, that number had almost doubled.

A new wave of international expansion took place during the years after World War II. It was inspired by the mission encyclical *Fidei Donum* (The Gift of the Faith) in 1957, from Pope Pius XII. The Pope asked religious from wealthier countries to cooperate with the mission of the Church in needier countries. The actualization of this commitment started almost immediately. In 1958, the first brothers went to Kenya and Congo, in 1959, to South West Africa (later Namibia) and, in 1960, to Brazil. To support these missions, a house was also opened in California (1963). In order to provide funding for these foundations, CMM had to reduce its share in the educational field in the Netherlands and Belgium, and also in the Dutch Antilles. Priority was given to the education among the very poor; this apostolate was given the biblical motto: '*Go and teach*' (cf. Mt 10:7).

The internationalization of the Brothers CMM was not altogether a success story; the pioneers in the missions had to work very hard to establish schools and brother houses in other countries. Perhaps at the very beginning people underestimated what it meant to transplant religious life to another culture. Gradually the brothers noticed that they could not copy the lifestyle of their native country. The initial novitiates with local young people were a failure. The mission demanded much more preparation than the brothers had expected. A good integration in the local culture required an enormous amount of knowledge of the country, good language skills, and accurate appreciation of the local culture. Thus it took more than a generation before the brothers grasped the 'style.' From the years 1980-1990 and onwards, CMM started to grow in countries like Indonesia, Kenya, and Namibia. Around that same period it proved to be necessary to withdraw from Congo and the Dutch Antilles, while the presence in Suriname and California became more and more vulnerable. One of the most important reasons, besides the issue of age, was the lack of vocations in the Netherlands, Belgium, and countries such as Suriname and California. In our formation and training programs nowadays, we pay attention to the process of internationalization. We organize, for example, international meetings, exchange programs, and internships, so that we will

become more familiar with the international dimension, which characterizes our life as Brothers CMM.

At the moment, the Congregation has 300 brothers in nine countries. Besides the Netherlands and Belgium, there are brothers in Indonesia, East Timor, Kenya, Tanzania, Namibia, Brazil, and the Philippines. On account of our presence in nine different countries and on four continents, the brothers do constitute truly an international community. At the same time, it is also true that the situation has been changing quite rapidly over the past two decades. In western countries the number of brothers is decreasing, while there is a slight increase in Indonesia, East Timor, Kenya, and Namibia. This has consequences for our governance, for the communities in which we live, and for the projects in which we are engaged. We also realize that we are few in number and that this has its consequences for governance and the possibilities for our mission.

When we as brothers work on internationalization, we want to see this against the background of our evangelical vocation, which goes beyond all borders. We want to share our passion for Christ and our passion for humanity by working towards a better and more humane world. We form one single international family of brothers and we work together, within the Church community, through the one comprehensive mission of mercy and brotherhood based on Vincentian spirituality.

OUR VINCENTIAN SPIRITUALITY

The spirituality of the Brothers CMM deals with our inspiration, the sources of our motivation, and the ideals from which we live.

When in the western world around the 1970s a severe identity crisis took place in religious life, a serious process of returning to the sources and re-founding started in order to revitalize our Congregation. This process of returning to the sources received strong momentum in the 1980s under the leadership of the then Superior General Brother Wim Verschuren. We were aided in this process by some of our brothers who studied Vincentian Spirituality at Rue de Sèvres in Paris, by the publications of Father Robert Maloney C.M., and at our request by the research into our spiritual roots by the Titus Brandsma Institute of Nijmegen. This search for the roots of the Gospel and the spirit and intentions of our founder, Joannes Zwijsen, turned out to be an arduous, yet fruitful and rewarding exercise. We rediscovered that our founder was part of the Vincentian movement of mercy. The practical way Vincent pursued was appealing to Zwijsen, and he was guided by the Vincentian ideal of lay-religious life. We rediscovered that our spirituality was solidly based on three main pillars: the Gospel of Jesus, the principles of Vincent de Paul, and the directives of Zwijsen. Since

1994, the year of our 150th anniversary, the Congregation has emphatically made the evangelical core value of mercy the central word of its spirituality her own again. With the parable of the Good Samaritan as a starting point, she has formulated mercy as a threefold way of *'seeing,' 'being moved,'* and *'getting into action.'* And flowing from our charism of mercy and brotherhood, our one mission as a Congregation is to make God's mercy visible, audible, and tangible.

Therefore, based on the Gospel and following in the footsteps of Saint Vincent and Joannes Zwijsen, we want to be active in the Church and the world and thus live out our spirituality. This Vincentian spirituality of mercy and brotherhood we consider our charism, our gift to Church and world. In Mary, the mother of Jesus, who also is called Mother of Mercy, we have an inspiring model of simplicity, loving dedication, and trust in God. In brotherhood and in solidarity with others we have an inspiring example in Saint Vincent, who, as 'Father of the Poor,' showed us in his own life how to be mercifully close to the poor. The Vincentian virtues of simplicity, humility, meekness, mortification, and apostolic zeal are dear to us.

Today the Brothers CMM continue the works of mercy of Jesus and Saint Vincent in their care of and attention for the poor. Over the last two decades they have given vision and form to a number of innovative projects, embedded in our Vincentian spirituality of mercy and brotherhood.

Besides structures that often existed already for a long time with regard to education and schooling, innovative projects originated, because fellow brothers started those projects based on the needs they saw. On account of the fact that they were *being moved* to the core of their being, they could not do anything else but *get into action!*

In the following three paragraphs some concrete examples are given of initiatives to indicate how our branch of the Vincentian Family is active in carrying out the works of mercy for the underprivileged in society. Furthermore, we find it essential that we deepen and share our Vincentian spirituality with others. This requires that we be inspired by the Gospel and our patrons, Mary and Vincent, and radiate the warmth of compassion and wholehearted commitment to the spirit of mercy and brotherhood to others.

I. The Works of Mercy in the Ministry of CMM

A center for spirituality and work 'Zin in Werk' in Vught, the Netherlands.

In the year 2000, an old and abandoned brother house was transformed into a reflection and conference center 'Zin in Werk,' where professionals, educators, managers, and people from business, government, and the health sector come for programs, work at developing

their skills and values for living in the spirit of mercy and brotherhood, in order to find greater meaning and purpose in their work. Next to the center Zin is the Eleousa community. The brothers are active in Zin as a support community by their presence, their witnessing, and their concrete involvement in the activities of the center. One of the activities the Eleousa community sponsors and organizes every year on its own is offering two weeks of recreational summer programs for handicapped and poor families, who otherwise would not be able to have any vacation.

De Vuurhaard (The Fireplace) in Udenhout, the Netherlands, is a community of brothers that for the last 15 years has been a warm and hospitable haven for families of refugees who escaped war, poverty, discrimination, or persecution. The refugees feel welcome and at home. Once a week they cook a meal of their country of origin for an average of 40 invited guests. At those dinners the brothers have an opportunity to make the guests, through formal and informal presentations, aware of the problematic political, economic, and personal situation of the residents.

The Elim community is a small group of brothers in Tilburg, the Netherlands, who, as in the biblical Elim, wants to be an oasis where people can quench their spiritual thirst, rest, and regain their strength for life's journey. The brothers want to really live the spirituality of brotherhood, mercy, and hospitality through a number of activities, such as programs on the Bible, presentations and workshops on liturgy and spirituality, evening meditations, or the viewing and discussion afterwards of an occasional film. Together with the parish, they organize twice a week, in a warm ambiance, an attractive meal for lonely and elderly people.

A Credit Union was established on the island of Nias, west of Sumatra, Indonesia, to improve the living conditions of many farmers on the island. With 20 offices, the economic situation and thereby the standard of living has improved significantly for some 35,000 members. After the tsunami of 2004 and the earthquake of 2005 hit the area, the Credit Union assisted financially in the rebuilding of Nias.

Four informal high schools were designed in Kenya in the 1990s, by the Kenyan brothers for the poor who were unable to attend secondary school. Because of the informal character of these schools, poor students with little financial means could still get a diploma. These projects inspired people from the Netherlands to provide financial support. One of the schools, St. Justino Secondary School in one of the slums in Nairobi, has been able to construct a new building with the support of St. George College, a secondary school in Eindhoven, the Netherlands. Over the years these schools have become mainstream secondary schools, but still with a special focus on the poor child.

The Oyugis Integrated Project was developed by the brothers in the western part of Kenya, near Lake Victoria, where close to 70% of the adult population is affected by HIV/AIDS. It is an anti-AIDS development project that provides medical, educational, and social care as well as agricultural information and guidance in a society that is largely disorganized on account of this disease. Due to the enormous increase of orphaned children over the last number of years the brothers have, after a thorough evaluation of the whole project, decided to concentrate their efforts increasingly more on the education of orphans. In the Netherlands OIP has a support foundation carried on creatively and effectively organized by two associate members of the Brothers CMM.

Father Grol's Welfare Project employs three of our brothers who are active in visiting the 95 prisons in Kenya, trying to make the plight of prisoners more humane by requesting from donors clothing, medicines, and sports equipment. They have been able to initiate educational programs in prisons and, by their perseverance, have been able to receive permission from the prison authorities for inmates to sit for exams, so that after their release they have more opportunities to make a fresh start.

Cidade do Menor, a Children's Village in Coronel Fabriciano, Brazil is managed by the brothers. Wards of the court and street children are being looked after in a family setting.

Prison pastoral ministry. A pastoral center called 'Our Lady of Peace' and a pastoral team have been established by the brothers in São Joaquim de Bicas, Brazil. Detainees in two prisons are visited regularly and assisted in some small ways.

Not all the works of mercy undertaken by the Brothers CMM have been a success story. We sometimes started projects that later failed. There were also projects that only succeeded after many years of trial and error. Usually it is not on account of the financial situation that projects fail. We often experience the inability of fellow brothers, internationally composed or otherwise, to work or live together. Or there are situations in which fellow brothers are unable to create mutual unity and fail to radiate that unity, making a project quite vulnerable. We not only have success stories but we also have our confrontations with failures. Those too belong to our community. Those too are a genuine concern to all of us.

II. Deepening and Sharing our Spirituality

From the start of the Congregation the laity has been actively involved in the work of the Congregation as coworkers. In the last couple of decennia, the conviction has been growing ever more increasingly in the Congregation that it is important to share our spirituality with the laity. That involvement materialized in the acceptance of associate

members, but also in other forms of commitment, such as the Movement of Mercy and the Ambassadors of a Worldwide Brotherhood.

The Movement of Mercy in the Netherlands is an initiative of the Brothers CMM. It originated in 1998 as a result of a national publicity and recruiting campaign. The Movement of Mercy has as its goal to support and inspire people who want to live their lives in a merciful way. Now the movement has grown to about 1200 participants, most of whom live in the Netherlands. There are at the moment 'Circles of Mercy' in six cities in the Netherlands. Twice a year days of inspiration are organized for all the members in the reflection and conference center Zin in Vught. Similar initiatives have been developed by the communities of the brothers in Balige on Sumatra, Indonesia and by the brothers' retreat and reflection center 'Vicente de Paulo' in Igarapè, Brazil.

The Ambassadors of a Worldwide Brotherhood is an international group of young people who are committed to a worldwide movement of mercy and brotherhood. The Congregation founded this youth movement in 2008, in the different countries where the brothers are involved in the works of mercy. Under the CMM flag about one hundred young people from Brazil, Indonesia, East Timor, Kenya, Tanzania, Namibia, and the Netherlands participated in the World Youth Days in Sydney, in Madrid, and in Rio de Janeiro. Each country group is under the leadership of a young brother. The starting point of their foundational program is always: 'Jesus, our compass, our way to compassion.' The purpose of the Ambassadors of a Worldwide Brotherhood is to bring young people together in an international context. The World Youth Days turn out to be an excellent opportunity for young people to get into contact with the World Church and with the Gospel. Since 2008, every two or three years new Ambassadors come together for an international meeting and then join the World Youth Days together. For the Ambassadors, these World Youth Days are not the ultimate goal, but a stepping stone to achieve and expand our movement of mercy and brotherhood worldwide. This is a process that is specifically facilitated by intensive prayer and reflection, sharing and working sessions together in the week before and the week after the World Youth Days. Since the World Youth Days in Sydney 2008, the Ambassadors meet regularly in the various countries for social gatherings, prayer, and reflection periods. They stay in contact with each other via their website: <http://worldwidebrotherhood.com/> and *Facebook*.

Quite a number of initiatives have been taken by the Kenyan Ambassadors in the field of serving the poor. We would like to mention, for example, the agricultural project, the school program project, and the water project they started. And, in 2011, they organized a Christmas food drive for the orphans of the Asante Children's Home in Naivasha and for people who live in the Kibagare and Kangemi slums of Nairobi.

Another illustration on which the Ambassador program has its effect is the Walk with Christ in Windhoek, Namibia that, since 2009, they arrange every year during Lent. Together with the Brothers CMM they also initiated, in 2013, at the time of the World Youth Days in Brazil, the first Catholic National Youth Days in their country. More than 700 youths came together to Windhoek, the capital, for a weekend of prayer, sharing, and celebration.

In Brazil the Ambassadors are known as: Grupo Vocacional Misericórdia (GVM). In 2013, they had the honour of inviting and hosting their Ambassador brothers and sisters from six other countries in their home country for the World Youth Days in Rio de Janeiro.

In 2016, under the leadership of the Brothers CMM, a significant number of Ambassadors of the Worldwide Brotherhood from seven countries will participate again in the World Youth Days, this time in Krakow, Poland.

III. Participation in the Vincentian Family

After the 'rediscovery' of the Vincentian character of our Congregation, fellow brothers have dedicated themselves to the Vincentian Family and they were also there from the start in forging and nurturing those Vincentian Family ties, especially in the Netherlands and in Indonesia.

In the Netherlands, in 1997, at the initiative of the Brothers CMM, together with the Congregation of the Mission of the Netherlands and the Sisters SCMM, the Dutch Vincentian Family was established. Presently 12 congregations are members. An ever larger group comes together yearly for a day of sharing information about the weal and woe of projects for the poor, and to have prayerful reflections. This is done through the telling of real-life stories with Vincentian themes and PowerPoint presentations. Since 1998, under the inspiration of and guidance by the Brothers CMM, the Vincentian Family in the Netherlands has organized 12 two-week Vincentian pilgrimages to France.

In Indonesia the brothers are active in the Vincentian movement (KEVIN). They were at the forefront of promoting the spirituality and activities of the Vincentian Family in Indonesia.

Participation in the CIF program. For a number of years the Brothers CMM have taken part in the ongoing Vincentian Formation (CIF) program in Paris. Yearly one or two brothers attend this intense ongoing formation program which includes topics on the historical background of Saint Vincent, the history of the Congregation of the Mission, Vincentian spirituality, the vows, systemic change, signs of the times, and ongoing renewal.

The 350th Anniversary Celebration. During the 350th anniversary celebration of the deaths of the Saints Vincent de Paul and Louise de

Marillac, the Brothers CMM joined the Vincentian Family worldwide in their monthly days of recollection for prayer, reflection, and sharing by using the 12 reflection bulletins of the Vincentian Family Heritage Commission. The materials, available in English and Portuguese, were translated by a small working group of the Brothers CMM into Bahasa Indonesian and Dutch to be of service also to the brothers living in those language areas. They were published on the website of the Brothers CMM as well, so that also in these language areas some justice could be done to these two great prophets of charity.

Participation in the Vincentian Family Executive Committee. In January 2015, Father G. Gregory Gay, Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission, decided to expand the Vincentian Family Executive Committee with three more branches of the Vincentian Family to enhance the work of the VFEC and thereby ultimately strengthening the Vincentian Family. The Congregation of the Brothers CMM, which has been actively involved in the Vincentian Family leadership and formation programs, as well as in other collaborative activities with the Vincentian Family since its inception, was asked to serve on the board of the Vincentian Family Executive Committee. Brother Lawrence Obiko, Superior General, was personally asked by Father Gregory Gay and accepted the invitation. Brother Broer Huitema, the former Superior General, was chosen as his assistant.

“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.

Federation of the Congregations Coming Out of Strasbourg

M. Verónika Häusler

Federation Advisor

Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Augsburg

Preamble

The birth of the Federation of the Vincentian Congregations (the Congregations coming out of Strasbourg) is rooted in the land of Alsace.

In the 18th century, the Bishop of Strasbourg, Cardinal Armand Gaston de Rohan, took the initiative to send young women of his diocese to the Sisters of Saint Paul of Chartres, to form them in the religious life, with a view to founding a congregation for the service of the poor and the sick in his diocese. Thus were founded, in 1734, the Sisters of Charity of Strasbourg.

In the first Rule of Life reported from Chartres, many are the references that might be called Vincentian. Indeed, 1737 being the year of the canonization of Vincent de Paul, the fervor for his life and work developed widely. The first ecclesiastical superior of the Congregation, Canon Jean, made this great saint of charity known to the Sisters. He managed to get them excited about his spirituality and encouraged them to live according to his example. Therefore, Vincent de Paul became the spiritual patron of the Congregation and the protector of the works at the service of the poor, the sick, and the orphans. This identification was such that the new congregation was called: Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul.

In the 19th century, the Congregation of Strasbourg was called to form young girls for foundations in Germany and Austria. Little by little, these foundations became autonomous congregations.

Vatican Council II

The intuition to bring together these autonomous congregations in a Federation grew in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. Let us hear from a witness of that time:

“...through the invitation of Mother Marie Ange in 1956, the desire of going back to the source pushed us to meet at the Motherhouse of Strasbourg. ‘We’ are all members of Congregations coming out of Strasbourg. In 1966, it was clear that the links created throughout common reflection led us on a way of renewal of our Congregations, as requested by Vatican Council II. This approach would involve a

union of our forces for a common purpose and could be considered in a resolute way” (Superior Mack).

As for many things in the Church today that have become natural for us, the Federation is like a “daughter” of the Second Vatican Council. It is based on two texts: *Perfectae Caritatis* and a text of Canon Law:

1. *“The adaptation and renewal of the religious life includes both the constant return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the institutes and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time” (PC, 2).*

2. *“Independent institutes and monasteries should, when opportune and the Holy See permits, form federations if they can be considered as belonging to the same religious family. Others who have practically identical constitutions and rules and a common spirit should unite, particularly when they have too few members...” (PC, 22).*

As in many ecclesial places, in our Congregations also, the meaning and purpose of the texts were well lived before the publication of these decrees. Many aspired to a reform, many others sought for a renewal of religious life in its external and internal form. This research allowed a return to the sources, to the spirit of the origins and we found ourselves on this way of renewal. All were able to join this process of “returning to the essentials.”

The development of the Federation

Through the decrees of 15 April and 13 November 1971, the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes in Rome erected the Federation of Congregations arising directly or indirectly from the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Strasbourg. While respecting the freedom and independence of each Congregation, the Federation seeks to constitute a large, unique family whose members share the same spirit of Saint Vincent, in order to have the people of God benefit better from the specific gifts and values of each.

At its beginning, the Federation had approximately 10,000 Sisters.

Very quickly, the collaboration bore fruit:

- A joint quarterly magazine was published: *Heute [Today]*;
- Common times during initial formation were organized: novitiate, preparation for perpetual vows, and, later on, meeting of the junioristes at the places of origin of the Congregations;
- Proposal of meditation courses and ongoing formation;
- Reflection and work for a rule of common life, which became effective in 1985;
- Sabbatical months for older religious.

The common missionary adventure began in India in 1973. The Motherhouses of Fribourg in Brisgau and of Fulda, Heppenheim, and Paderborn were active members of this foundation. On 29 September 1994, this foundation was erected as an autonomous Congregation and became a member of the Federation.

The Province of Korea, coming from the Congregation of Paderborn, also became an autonomous Congregation on 21 June 1990 and has been a part of the Federation since 30 January 2004.

The year 1994 marked the affiliation of the Federation with the International Vincentian Family. The ceremony took place in the Chapel of the Motherhouse of Strasbourg.

In July 2015, the Federation counted 14 Congregations: in France (Strasbourg), in Germany (Augsburg, Fulda, Fribourg, Heppenheim, Hildesheim, Munich, Paderborn, Untermarchtal), in Austria (Innsbruck, Vienna, Zams), in India (Mananthavady) and in Korea (Suwon). The Congregations of Untermarchtal and Innsbruck have a Region in Tanzania; those of Hildesheim and Zams are present in Peru. The Congregation of Vienna has a Province in the Czech Republic; Innsbruck has two Provinces in Italy. The Sisters of Korea are sent on mission to Bangladesh and Myanmar. Sisters of the Congregation of India live in the United States and take care of Mexican refugees. Today the Federation has 2840 Sisters.

Our life with regard to the heritage of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac

The history of our beginnings means that our Congregations are strongly impregnated by the charism and spirituality of Vincent de Paul. The person and the spirituality of Louise de Marillac appeared much later. The German-language Congregations owe a lot to the commitment of Sister Alfonsa Richartz, Daughter of Charity of Cologne, who promoted the discovery and knowledge of Louise de Marillac, as well as access to her writings.

It is thus that we try to live the spirituality of these two great saints of charity and to adapt their charism in the daily life of our Congregations and in concrete actions in the service of the poor people and the sick who are entrusted to us.

Our European realities are strongly marked by the ageing of the members of the Congregations and the lack of vocations. The Congregations at the service for the poor, the sick, and troubled children often manage large institutions and are at the head of huge buildings. With increasing frequency, the vital forces of our European Congregations are no longer sufficient and the people, who can take responsibility in the management of institutions, are becoming more and more rare. New ways, therefore, must open, new collaboration must be invented.

The two Congregations having young sisters, in India and Korea, just as the communities in Africa, are in a process of development and expansion. The number of aspirants, who are knocking at the door of these communities, is such that it allows for new foundations (in Ethiopia for example).

We would like to present to you here, as an example, three challenges, which push us, in Europe, to grasp the future. The transmission of the charism and collaboration with the laity. Due to the above-mentioned situation, that is to say, the ageing of European congregations, it turns out that over the past 25 years approximately, the management of health-related and social works can no longer be ensured by the Sisters themselves. The health sector, in particular, is evolving a lot in legal and legislative ways and requires very specific management profiles. Little by little, lay collaborators are hired for positions of governance in the congregational works.

Actually, even for the Congregations, this question often arises: What responsibilities, in terms of the management of the Congregations, can we entrust to the laity? (Treasurer's office, for example).

Within our Federation, we try to consider these issues with clarity and to recognize therein a sign of the times. It is there that Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac can be valuable witnesses for us. Did they not, from the beginning, collaborate with lay people, stimulate networks, and have various socio-professional categories and different states of life? Our concern is for the transmission of the charism of Vincent de Paul to the laity: how to bring this charism up to date in order to allow our collaborators to make it their own, to live it, and to have it lived in their way? How do we pass on the fire that animated Vincent, to all these people, so that it continues to burn in the hearts of each one?

In 2003, we began a reflection on the transmission of the works: what are our needs? How can we help and support one another? How can we benefit from the experiences of each other? What are the possibilities of collaboration for us within the Federation?

Our first approach is to define a common base of values from the spirituality of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac. This base allows us to restrict our field of action. In order to reach as many collaborators as possible, we have organized three reflection groups that will gather over two years. The first group is composed of Superiors General of the different Congregations. The purpose is to strengthen them in their role as leader, to support them in the transmission of the Vincen-tian values to lay collaborators, and to teach them to guide this process of transmission. A second group consists of Sisters called "Reduction Agents." Their role is to reflect on the ground how concretely to transmit these values and thus be an effective support for the Superiors General.

Finally, the third group is one of people in a position of governance, who bear the responsibility of values. This group has as a goal to be a venue for formation and support.

From these modules of formation, arose, in 2010, a “forum of values.” This group meets once a year, to share experiences, to discuss topical social and ethical questions, and to draw up general policy options.

Therefore, we experience what may be a reflection on “a Vincentian network”: an enriching collaboration, opening up many opportunities, and also opening the realms of the possible, which help to find answers to common concerns.

Common elements in Formation

Initial formation within our Congregations is the second area that we want to present. With regard to the decreasing number of young women wishing to commit themselves in our Congregations, the unitary phenomenon (one young woman per congregation) is much more pronounced. In addition, there is the financial question of having quality speakers give a talk for the formation of a very small number. These two givens (the single individual in our novitiates, the price of speakers) led the formators of the various congregations, to reflect, in 2011, on a common project for the European Congregations. This program is spread over three years and comprises common modules of formation for postulants and novices.

During the modules of variable durations (from one to three weeks), basic topics are addressed: human development, consecrated life, spiritual life, as well as Vincentian spirituality. All is jointly prepared with everyone responsible for formation. These meetings allow the young sisters to be confronted with other young women of the same age, to experience life in a group with people who are at the same stage of formation: experiences that cannot, in general, be had in the respective Congregations. Moreover, the size of the group allows for calling upon outside speakers on specific topics to complement the expertise of the formators. The Federation supports this initiative by placing qualified sisters at its service and also gives financial support for the program.

All of the formation modules have been held at the “House of origin,” house of welcome of the Congregation of Strasbourg, which is the foundation site of this Congregation. More and more, this house is becoming a place of revitalization for the Federation.

Between the different modules, the formators work in a coordinated way, in their Congregations, so that a total process established over three years can occur. The experiences of the first rollout of three years are positive on the side of the formators. They feel supported and stimulated in their mission through the networking process. The Sisters

in formation also describe these meeting times as moments of enrichment, enabling encounters and sharing of experiences with people living in the same context. These meetings especially permit the young Sisters to realize that they are not alone on the way of consecrated life. The reciprocal exchange becomes support on the vocational journey.

Internationality

The brief overview, at the beginning of our remarks, showed that internationality is a reality of the Federation.

The 2011 talk of Sister Evelyn Franc, Superioress General of the Daughters of Charity, invited to Strasbourg for the annual Council of the Federation, was decisive in this regard. *“We still recognize today the need to deepen the spirit of ‘Communion,’ the dimension of internationality, and the importance of resisting the temptation to isolate ourselves on behalf of our own charism. This would be rigidity, contrary to the essence of consecrated life. Complementarity and diversity are inseparable. Complementarity is not the sum of the different realities, but the meeting of the realities that enrich themselves.”*

A working group was set up, with the challenge to develop viable reflection axes from the masterful talk. Sister Christa Bauer, General Councillor of the Daughters of Charity in Paris, lent a helping hand to this research.

The work of reflection is far from complete. However, the working group has made some concrete progress:

- The position of “Federation advisor,” established in 2010 to support concretely all the projects of the Federation and thus allow continuity in the work, will be filled by a Federation Sister, fluent in at least two languages, German and English, to enable efficient communication with the Congregations of Asia and Africa.

- The awareness of the theme “Missionary Purpose” has been promoted at all levels of the Federation: the Superiors General, annual assembly, magazine *Heute* [Today].

- MEGVIS, the Central European Group of Vincentian Studies, has existed for 40 years. Since 2010, three sisters from various Congregations of the Federation participate in the preparatory group and bring dynamism and skills to it. (The Vincentian Family is represented in this group from the Netherlands to Hungary).

- Taking into account the non-European Congregations in the development of the Federation is a major concern for the Federation Council. The proof of this is that during the 2015 annual council the issue of migrants was discussed. The countries most affected are Germany and Austria. Ideas and concrete actions were pooled.

- Innovative avenues making meetings possible are always welcome within the Federation. Any initiative encouraging meetings is received favorably within the Federation, which remains a laboratory of ideas. A meeting of the Sisters under 65 years of age is already planned; the theme is: “Dream,” the Federation in the year 2030.

Being part of the International Vincentian Family, FAMVIN, has very positive effects on the development of the Federation of Congregations coming out of Strasbourg. Systematic access to the communications of FAMVIN and our participation in international meetings oblige us to consider in an evermore-conscious way the international dimension of our Federation.

Prospects for the future

By its nature, our Federation is a collection of autonomous Congregations. Gradually, following the appeals of Vatican Council II, in dialogue and with attention to the signs of the times, a sense of belonging inexorably grew. For the past 25 years, this belonging to a large Vincentian Family has become increasingly obvious. Our participation, since 1998, at the meeting of FAMVIN contributes strongly to it. The same goes for the relations with the Motherhouse in Paris, which, over the years have become more and more fraternal and personal. All these meetings give a concrete face to this affiliation.

We are even more pleased to note that the networking, this collaboration with the branches of the Vincentian Family are a lived reality for our Congregations in Korea and India.

In Europe, it seems important and vital to us to respond to the signs of the times and to develop, with our lay collaborators, a spirituality network in the spirit of Saint Vincent. To them also, we are trying to pass on the joyful consciousness of belonging to this international movement that is the FAMVIN.

We are trying and hoping that our relations with the German-language Daughters of Charity remain quite alive. Did not the origins of the communities of Salzburg and Graz have their founding roots in Strasbourg?

This hope is also true for our relations with the Priests of the Mission. Beginning in 2016, a Vincentian will be a “spiritual advisor” of our Federation. The MEGVIS meeting remains a gift for the various participants in the discovery of the spirit of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac.

We live in the great joy of the heritage entrusted to us by our two spiritual patrons. We are trying to put it in harmony and resonance with the particular history of each of our Congregations, which today constitute our Federation. We try to make this heritage alive in the

contexts that are ours and find a suitable response to the needs of men and women today.

Let us ask Saint Vincent and Saint Louise to intercede for us so that we might be worthy of being their disciples and that we might put into practice their founding principles: *“The fifth teaching is zeal, consisting in a pure desire to become pleasing to God and helpful to our neighbor: zeal to spread the kingdom of God and zeal to procure the salvation of our neighbor. Is there anything in the world more perfect? If love of God is a fire, zeal is its flame; if love is a sun, zeal is its ray. Zeal is unconditional in the love of God”* (CCD XII, 250, Conference of August 22, 1659, “The Five Characteristic Virtues”).

Translation by: NARCISSE DJERAMBETE, C.M.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC COMMENT

The Correspondence of Frédéric Ozanam

This four-volume work (in Spanish) is based on the French critical edition (*Lettres de Frédéric Ozanam*, published by the Saint Vincent de Paul Society [1961 and 2013]). The letters have been translated into Spanish by the Vincentian Missionary, Jaime Corera. The editor and coordinator of this work is Francisco Javier Fernández Chento, a lay Vincentian who is preparing the Appendix and other complementary material.

We are pleased to be able to present this special work which is the fruit of more than five years of research. We are sure that this work will be of **special interest to all the members of the Vincentian Family**.

For the first time in Spanish (through Editorial Milagrosa) we are able to present the complete correspondence of Blessed Frédéric Ozanam. This material is fundamental for those who want to know the person and the gifts of this great layman of the XIX century. This critical edition brings together the almost **1500 letters that are known to have been written by Frédéric**.

This work is written in Spanish and will be composed of four volumes, the first of which is now available.

We hope that this important work will be lovingly embraced and reflected upon by those who, on a daily basis, live out the Vincentian charism.

Father Teodoro Barquín, C.M.
Director of La Editorial La Milagrosa
Phone: 914 463 132
e-mail: lamilagrosa@telefonica.net



How to obtain a copy

The first volume (736 pages) will be published on October 10, 2015 (the other three will follow in 2016 and 2017).

The hardback edition can be obtained for 40 € and the paperback edition for 25. The content is the same in both editions.

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Jean Landousies, C.M.
Javier Álvarez Munguía, C.M.
Jorge Luis Rodríguez, C.M.
Giuseppe Turati, C.M.

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