

Mercy as Part of Our Being as Vincentians

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Introduction

As we all know, Pope Francis, through his publication of the Bull, *Misericordiae Vultus*, proclaimed a Holy Year of Mercy. This extraordinary jubilee began on the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception (8 December 2015) and will conclude on the solemnity of Christ the King (20 November 2016). This jubilee provides the faithful with an opportunity to reflect upon and to practice the virtue of mercy. Furthermore, the People of God are invited to be mindful of the fact that 2015 marks the 50th anniversary of the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, which opted for a more merciful Church and a kinder pastoral approach.

Mercy is the virtue that moves an individual to compassion when confronted with the suffering of others and also impels an individual to act in order to heal that suffering. Therefore, mercy is a virtue that is most important to the members of the Vincentian Family. This is true despite the fact that providence and the will of God have been given greater prominence in our tradition.

If we apply the definition of this virtue to Saint Vincent de Paul, we ought to remember that Vincent is the saint of merciful charity. The whole Vincentian Family is called to live this virtue in an intense and renewed manner. Therefore, in this article I invite you to recall some of the reflections that Vincent offered with regard to this virtue. Then, as always, let us together attempt to practice this virtue with hearts that have been fortified by love. As I do whenever I am about to write, I have just prepared an herbal tea and have placed some crackers (*criollitas*) on a plate.

A just and merciful God

We know full well that the 17th century created a religious experience that was guilt ridden, harsh, and quite pessimistic. There are certain eras in which it is difficult to reconcile justice with divine mercy in the Church's pastoral approach. In the 17th century (and this

was not the only century) there seemed to be a focus on a fearful God rather than an awesome God (and at times God was even viewed as a terrible, stern God). Therefore, with regard to the delicate balance between justice and mercy, this era focused on justice and on a particular manner of interpreting justice.

One way to be kind to this era is to affirm the fact that the people continued to view the sacredness of the reality that surrounded them. Indeed, despite the many advances of science, there was a sector of Christianity that maintained a sacred vision of the world: everything happens in accord with the will of God and secondary causes are on a lower level. In this view of reality, natural catastrophes and epidemics were seen as a divine punishment for sin. Disasters that effected towns and villages, as well as individual suffering, all of these were seen as signs of God's anger.

Saint Vincent was not exempt from such a vision. We find various texts that refer to the Divine's harshness. In other words, Vincent was a child of his era and that is obvious. As we read his writings, we notice that he points out the fact that it is proper for divine justice to punish evil.¹ On other occasions, Vincent refers to God's harshness when he speaks about the fact that God does not forget our sins. Thus, illness, war, and other calamities are viewed as divine punishments.²

This image of the Almighty, however, is expanded as Vincent refers to an openness to mercy. Therefore, Vincent exhorted his followers to trust in God's love: *May God have pity on them and grant those who provoke his justice the grace to amend their lives* (CCD:VI:90). In other words, the affirmations of the Divine's harshness are blended with the assertions of divine mercy. Thus, a middle ground is attained: together with the affirmation of God punishing people for their individual and

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 XII, pp. 115-116; 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:115-116.

² For example, when Vincent speaks about the plague in Rome and Genoa he states: *We are very distressed indeed about this, Monsieur, especially since neither the change of season nor the prayers that the whole Church has offered during the Jubilee have yet been able to stem the tide of that disease nor cause it to subside. The sins of the Christian state must be very great, since they oblige God to exercise his justice in this way. May it please his mercy to come in its turn to visit those poor towns soon and to console the many persons afflicted everywhere in one way or another! We must thank God fervently for having spared our houses until now and ask him to continue to protect them to the end* (CCD:VI:169-170).

social sins, there is also a proclamation of the certainty of God's mercy.³ Furthermore, I believe that, overall, Vincent gave primacy to divine mercy which led him to, what we might call today, a kind and affirming pastoral approach.

God, above all else, is merciful and the way in which that mercy is revealed is through pardoning (even though at times the concept of mercy is expressed in the baroque context of suffering). We are, therefore, invited to reflect on this virtue in order to increase our desire to strengthen our relationship with God. This means that we live in a manner that does not offend God and when we do offend God, we need to make reparation and to trust in God: *isn't it a great mercy of God to welcome us back into His grace after we had rebelled against him* (CCD:XI:118). I apologize if this point seemed to have been labored but it was important to nuance certain points. Hopefully the next section will not be as tedious.

The concept of mercy in Saint Vincent

Vincent de Paul utilized the classical concept of mercy.⁴ Mercy is love that acts when confronted with a situation of need (and that is an essential characteristic of mercy). Mercy intervenes in asymmetrical situations, but we must also recall that mercy acts in a resolute manner when confronted with the suffering of others (this is so because our affectivity had previously been mobilized). We can see, then, that mercy involves two dimensions of love: affective and effective. Mature love is characterized by these two dimensions which are indissoluble.

In Vincent de Paul, mercy is applied in the first instance to God. The Christian God is a merciful God. This is the first and primary

³ When Saint Vincent speaks of divine mercy, he refers to an aspect that is proper to God and when he refers to his merciful charity, he highlights God's infinite kindness and compassion. People are called to practice this same *charitable justice* and in that way they will imitate the activity of the Divine. This was pointed out to Saint Louise who had to call attention to an individual but Vincent wanted to insure the fact that *justice may be accompanied by mercy* (CCD:I:449).

⁴ Cicero defined mercy as "the embarrassment that one experiences when confronted with the misery of a person who suffers as the result of an outrage" (IV Tusc. 8:18). Furthermore, Cicero highlights mercy so that people might become merciful: "a good person is one who is merciful"; "among all the many virtues there is none more admirable nor more pleasing than mercy." In the Christian world, mercy was analyzed by Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas. Thomas viewed mercy as one of the *interior effects of charity*. He also pointed out that people who possess good health or many material goods run the risk of not understanding the suffering of others. Those persons who have lost material possessions, health, and honor are most apt to console another (Summa II-II q.30).

characteristic of God. In the second instance, Vincent applies this concept of mercy to other individuals, for example, “Christians ought to be merciful” and “Christians ought to reveal the mercy of God.”

In Vincent’s view, clemency is closely related to mercy. God is clement and merciful. In classical thought, clemency is a virtue that is applied to men and women. Nevertheless, in the religious context, clemency highlights the fact that God is kind, forgiving, and does not deal with people according to sins when they have repented.⁵

The concepts of mercy and God’s providence are also closely related. They reinforce absolute trust in God. More specifically, our Founder points out that the Missionaries should live in a state of ongoing mortification, which expresses, among other things, a complete detachment from material goods. This statement is reinforced by recounting the story of Comte Rougemont who progressively detached himself from the things of this world, so much so that he ultimately rid himself of his sword. Thus, his only protection and guide were God’s providence and mercy (CCD:XI:103-104).

Vincent de Paul invites us to have complete confidence in God. We must trust in God and one of God’s attributes is mercy. Therefore, we must trust in God who is infinitely merciful (CCD:I:84). Calmly Vincent spoke to Louise de Marillac and stated: *put aside the misgivings that you are allowing to enter your heart. Be fully confident that you are the dear daughter of Our Lord, through his mercy* (CCD:I:145).

Through the mercy of God, men and women can expect everything that is good, especially the forgiveness of sin. Thus people can also expect that God will not deal with them according to their sins.⁶

Jesus Christ, the expression of the Father’s mercy

Our Founder discovered in the Incarnate Word the greatest proof of God’s love. He lived among us in order to evangelize the poor. God-Love became the missionary in the person of Jesus Christ, who came

⁵ We should remember that in the classical Latin world, clemency is part of the virtue of temperance. Said virtue is revealed as indulgence and moderation and is opposed to severity and cruelty. This virtue was promoted by the stoics.

⁶ This text is very complicated: Vincent tells M. Lambert that he will send M. Boudet to join him in his local community. M. Boudet was not very healthy but was very virtuous. In order to highlight the virtue of this priest he refers to the fact that this priest is a sinner who trusts in God’s mercy. M. Boudet is quoted as having said: *I am the only one who is a miserable sinner; who does only harm on earth. I must hope that God will be pleased to take me from it soon, as I must trust from his goodness, and that he will be merciful to me* (CCD:I:500-501).

to earth in order to reveal the divine mercy toward humankind. He took on the limitations proper to the human condition and thus revealed God's mercy to each and every individual. *Our Lord was really willing to pass for an insane person, as is recounted in the Holy Gospel, and for people to believe that He had become a madman ... He appeared like that to them [that is, to the Apostles] so that they might not only be witnesses to the fact that He had sympathized with all our weaknesses and sanctified our states of suffering and frailty, but also to teach them, and us as well, to have compassion on those who fall into these weaknesses* (CCD:XI:19). All the gospels proclaim that truth.

Mercy is active compassion. That reality is reflected in Jesus who is the response of God's affective and effective love when confronted with the misery of humankind. Therefore, we, all men and women, ought to imitate the activity of Jesus Christ, especially Jesus's reaching out to the forgotten and the abandoned members of society. This means, that like Jesus, we should enter into the sentiments of the other.

Vincent, after pointing out Jesus as the perfect model that is to be imitated, also refers to other paradigms of mercy. He speaks about Saint Martin of Tours and is moved as he recalled his merciful gesture in sharing his cape with a poor man.⁷ Vincent also referred to Saint John the Almsgiver, Archbishop of Alexandria, as a merciful person who was able to overcome every form of antipathy and enmity (CCD:X:372). Vincent presented Saint Roch as a model of merciful charity, a man who spent his life in the practice of charity and died as a result of having been infected with the plague by the people whom he served. Saint Roch fulfilled the teaching of Jesus who stated that there is no greater love than to offer one's life for one's neighbor (cf. John 15:13) (CCD:IX:34-38).

Furthermore, Vincent held up before the community various examples of merciful charity that he witnessed within the Congregation of the Mission. For example, he spoke about Brother Sirven, the living Rule of the Company in Sedan who cared for the infirm and the afflicted: *we have good reason to believe that God has crowned his soul in heaven, giving him the kingdom he has prepared for his beloved who practice works of mercy on earth* (CCD:VIII:395).

⁷ Vincent pointed out that the Christian community so admired Martin's charity that, even though he became a bishop, popular devotion is focused on his life as a catechumen and a Roman soldier, and as such he shared his cape with the poor man whom he encountered (CCD:XII:63).

Charity and Mercy⁸

Mercy has a human foundation that we call compassion. Any normal person is embarrassed and pained by the misery of another. That sustained attitude becomes a moral virtue and, in Christianity, that attitude becomes united with the supernatural virtue of charity. In other words, compassion is one of the interior effects of charity.

Vincent de Paul understood that the redemptive plan was a work of God's mercy. The Most High contemplated the deplorable condition of humanity after the sin of Adam and Eve and sought for a way to redeem humankind (CCD:X:14). Such redemption achieved its culmination in the person of Jesus. In the Scriptures Vincent discovered a Christ who practiced charity in an intense manner and this was made very clear in Jesus's mercy and tenderness. Thus, in imitation of the Lord, Christians are compassionate when confronted with the misery of others, and offer themselves as a gift to their neighbor. Mercy is charity that runs to assist those who are in need.

Therefore, we now point out some of the signs of merciful charity: (1) Those who are merciful suffer with those who suffer and weep with those who weep.⁹ (2) There is a need to sharpen our skills so that we can better resolve the suffering of our neighbor. There is nothing more removed from Vincentian ethics than indifference or insensitivity to the suffering of another. Affective communion must be followed with effective action that eradicates such misery. Mercy, as effective love, seeks to resolve every problem. (3) Those who are merciful never rejoice in the suffering of another but are aware of the fact that all people carry different crosses.

The centrality of charity is such that piety is subordinate to charitable activity. Such an attitude might seem foreign or strange to those who are guided by a ritualistic attitude. Nevertheless, Vincent addressed this matter when he spoke about leaving Mass in order to care for a poor person: *you are right in having no scruple about missing Mass to assist the poor, for God prefers mercy to sacrifice* (CCD:VII:66).

⁸ Cf. Rossetti, Enrico, "San Vincenzo de' Paoli, mistico della misericordia," *Divus Thomas* 4 (1960), 442-454.

⁹ This interior attitude must be expressed externally: (1) all one's gestures, especially one's facial expression, ought to reveal communion with other people's grief. In this way, the one who is grieved knows that his or her grief has now been shared; (2) one should use compassionate words so that one's neighbor understands that his sentiments, interest, and sufferings are truly shared.

In summary, perfect charity (CCD:I:327) implies developing not only one's proper action which is also one's predilection, but also developing one's internal acts (especially mercy) as well as one's external acts (focusing on providing assistance to those who are lacking). As one lives with an attitude of merciful charity, especially toward those who are poor, one fulfills the law and the prophets (CCD:VII:397).

By God's mercy

Vincent frequently spoke those words. What is their meaning? As we will see, they have several meanings. The phrase is spoken to show that one has matured ethically or that one has made progress in the practice of some specific virtue. The use of that phrase also gives witness to God's action, thus keeping one humble. At times Vincent used this phrase with regard to himself, for example, (1) he recognized that it was by God's mercy that he had grown in the practice of the virtue of simplicity; (2) Vincent trusted that by God's mercy there would be sufficient vocations in the Congregation. Therefore, in his search for new members, he was neither anxious nor hurried; he acted in a manner that revealed his conviction that God would send new members to the Congregation.¹⁰

On other occasions, Vincent used this phrase when referring to members of the Congregation of the Mission. (1) Vincent recognized that it was by the mercy of God that the members of the Congregation practiced poverty, chastity, and obedience and made much effort to live an orderly life (CCD:I:554); (2) Vincent pointed out that it was by the mercy of God that those in the internal seminary were determined to acquire a deeper spiritual life (CCD:I:555).

Vincent also used this phrase when he perceived that someone possessed some physical or material good, such as good health.¹¹ In the context of the theology of the 17th century, it was also through the mercy of God that people would experience some physical or spiritual defect. Those disabilities, when utilized in a proper way, enabled people to grow in humility, to detach themselves from every form of

¹⁰ *I think Our Lord grants me the mercy of not wanting men except when his providence draws them. Alas! Monsieur, how vain and blameworthy our desires are!* (CCD:I:585)

¹¹ *By God's mercy, I am feeling fine. May it please his goodness to grant me the grace of making good use of the health he is giving me* (CCD:I:562).

vanity, and to understand the limitations of others.¹² Vincent compared such limitations to the brush strokes of a great master, stating that *those who understand painting well put a higher value on the brush stroke of an excellent artist than on a completed picture done by a mediocre painter* (CCD:XI:119).

Vincent also utilized this phrase what he asked a person, in a kind manner, to modify some aspect of his/her behavior, for example, he asked Louise to be more joyful.¹³

Vincent also used the phrase, *an instrument of God's mercy*. What was the meaning of those words? Vincent understood that when a person was in a vulnerable situation, the individual who helped one move beyond such a situation was an instrument of God's mercy. For example, when he was a slave in Tunis, one of his masters was an orthodox Christian who had abandoned his faith. It is also know that this man had three wives, and one of them, a native Turk, *served God's immense mercy as an instrument in recalling her husband from apostasy*.¹⁴ These women became the means, the instruments, that convinced Vincent's master to return to the faith and to flee that country and return to France (CCD:I:8-9).

Mission, mercy, the poor¹⁵

This is a very Vincentian theme. The mission ought to provide people with an opportunity to discover what God desires of them. Saint Vincent invites us to make the mission an experience of God's

¹² Vincent used as an example his friend, Isabelle du Fay, who had a deformity, that is, one of her legs was two or three times larger than the other. That was an extremely rare condition. It was more common to find people who suffered from limb length discrepancy (one leg being longer than the other). In such a situation one suffers from hemihypertrophy, now more commonly referred to as hemihyperplasia in the medical literature (a condition in which one side of the body or a part of one side of the body is larger than the other to an extent considered greater than the normal variation). This deformity (which in the case of Isabelle du Fay might have been congenital) effected the soft tissue and she spoke of this deformity in terms of *my blessed leg*, because it made it impossible for her to be vain (something which could seduce a member of the noble class) and, instead, led her to service on behalf of those who were poor.

¹³ *I beg Our Lord to bless your trip and you yourself, and to multiply His blessings on your soul and that of Madame Goussault. Please be very cheerful with her, even though you should have to lessen a bit that somewhat serious disposition which nature has bestowed on you and which grace is tempering by the mercy of God* (CCD:I:491-492).

¹⁴ It is also know that this man had another wife, called Caiphas or Balaa's ass (her words) (CCD:I:8).

¹⁵ Jaime Corera Andía, C.M., "Vincent de Paul: the Social Commitment of a Man of Spirit" in *Vincentiana*, Volume 52, #5, September-October 2008, pp. 347-358.

loving mercy. At the same time, the Missionaries, trusting in God's providence and mercy ought to care for the poor country people (CCD:XI:391).

The Vincentian approach leads people to evangelize with humility, respect, and compassion. To act in a contrary manner will only alienate the poor from the Church. Nothing more attracts people to Jesus Christ than love and compassion. We have all experienced how our ill humor can become an obstacle to fulfilling the mission (anger, irritation, indifference, mood changes, etc.). Vincent counsels us to journey along the path of compassion and mercy. We can say that during Vincent's whole life he reached out to the poor and the forgotten, and did so with loving mercy.

Mercy does not end with some intimate element and that is what is novel about mercy. Indeed, mercy is intimately united with justice. In the view of Vincent de Paul, to act justly is one of the ways to assist the weak and the "little ones," one of the ways to restore to them their rights. Thus with his contemporaries, he saw the misery of his day and understood its causes and he sought to resolve those situations. He pointed out: *God will grant you the grace of softening our hearts toward the wretched creatures and of realizing that in helping them we are doing an act of justice and not of mercy* (CCD:VII:115).¹⁶ Vincent believed that if society did not provide for its weakest members, then the members of that society were not Christian.

Let us continue to reflect on this Vincentian novelty: merciful charity is not only intended to alleviate individual suffering but is also intended to better the social-living situation of poor people as a whole. The function of charity is to alleviate hunger and the need for clothing, but charity also attempts to stabilize the living conditions of those who are hungry or lack clothing, those who are ill and excluded, those who are unable to find work, who are spiritually ignorant, who lack culture, etc. As we reflect on this Vincentian principle, we should be strengthened as we renew our commitment to our first love.

In Vincent de Paul's vision, the practice of the virtue of mercy is not (like it was in the traditional Christian vision) an optional practice that depends on one's ability to be compassionate and generous, but rather is motivated by what today we refer to as social and radical justice.

¹⁶ Note that Vincent wrote those words to one of his Missionaries who had dedicated his ministry to bettering the material and the spiritual situation of prisoners, who were in a place that ought to become better to the degree that mercy and justice are applied.

This vision does not suppose devaluing the virtue of mercy, but quite the contrary; it supposes a radical consolidation of mercy, which means that mercy must be exercised in the midst of society. Furthermore, justice that is filled with mercy will attain the objectives, which regulations alone often fail to accomplish.¹⁷

Mercy, prayer, and sacraments

It is good to ask others to pray for us. This is a request that has been made famous by Pope Francis. How, though, should we pray for others? Among other things, Vincent de Paul teaches us to pray and to ask God to be merciful toward us. Thus Vincent requested a priest to pray for him: *while in your retreat you have sent several of them [letters] to heaven to obtain mercy for me for the abominations of my life* (CCD:II:314).

He asked to be commended to God's mercy so that he might have a good death after living a worthy life: *ask him for the grace to live better in order to die well* (CCD:I:586). Today, requesting a good death is something that is foreign to our thinking, but is necessary for those who believe in transcendence.¹⁸

We also should pray to be delivered from despair in carrying out our duties.¹⁹ Mercy is also experienced in the Sacrament of

¹⁷ The Bull, *Misericordiae Vultus*, refers to the relationship between these two realities, a relationship that is often difficult to reconcile: *It would not be out of place at this point, to recall the relationship between justice and mercy. These are not two contradictory realities, but two dimensions of a single reality that unfolds progressively until it culminates in the fullness of love (Misericordiae Vultus, #20). Mere justice is not enough. Experience shows that an appeal to justice alone will result in destruction. This is why God goes beyond justice with his mercy and forgiveness. Yet this does not mean that justice should be devalued or rendered superfluous. On the contrary: anyone who makes a mistake must pay the price. However, this is just the beginning of conversion, not its end, because one begins to feel the tenderness and mercy of God. God does not deny justice. He rather envelopes it and surpasses it with an even greater event in which we experience love as the foundation of true justice ... God's justice is his mercy given to everyone as a grace that flows from the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Misericordiae Vultus, #21).*

¹⁸ In the letter written to Louis Lebreton, Vincent used the example of Madame Goussault who *made a holy use of the long and painful illness which preceded her death and died with joy and jubilation* (CCD:I:586).

¹⁹ One of the defects that greatly disturbed Vincent was a desire to attain certain positions and then, having attained the position one would hold on to that position forever (Vincent saw this defect in ecclesiastics and consecrated persons). The cure for that was to have recourse to God's mercy: *Let me tell you that, if there's anyone among us who's not deeply moved – yes, deeply – with regret for having aspired to important ministries, and may not yet be disposed to abhor this craving and this cursed attraction for posts of responsibility and privileges, he's in a very sad state and worthy of compassion. He mustn't stop punishing himself with a hair shirt, the discipline, and*

Reconciliation. We know that in the 17th century this sacrament was celebrated with great formality. Vincent de Paul, however, had a more pastoral, a more benign approach to the sacrament; for example, he pointed out that some members of the Congregation were delayed in accompanying the French troops and their ministry was to hear the confessions of some 4000 soldiers. In many cases, there were signs of obvious repentance. God pours forth mercy upon those who take the time and make the effort to receive this sacrament.²⁰

A brief update²¹

I took a brief break to pour some more water into my tea. Fortunately, the herb, *rosamonte*, is sufficiently strong. I also took time to put some order into the things on my desk. I found various pens that had no tops. I also want to share with you the fact that I was born into a family that had strong Christian values. I went to a school that was administered by the Marist Brothers and I was a member of a parish that was administered by the Congregation of the Mission (the parish and the shrine of Our Lady of Lujan). I learned many good things from all these various people and, for that, I give thanks to God. The image of God that seemed to prevail was that of a stern God. It took several years for me to discover the God of mercy. Perhaps some readers have had a similar experience.

Moving our reflection to a more ecclesial level, we have to admit that for centuries people were instilled with a fear of God and were presented with an image of a stern God. The reasons for this are beyond the scope of this presentation. It must be stated, however, that, with the arrival of an extraordinary man, John XXIII, a new pastoral style was manifested, an approach focused on mercy. This same spirit prevailed during the Second Vatican Council. In his opening discourse, Pope John XXIII invited the Church to avoid every form of condemnation and to have recourse to the medicine of mercy. Years later, this tendency was made more explicit and deepened through the publication of a series of pontifical documents. John Paul II dedicated

other mortifications, until God has mercy on him, and he must go before the Blessed Sacrament and complain to God, "Ah. my God! What have I done? In truth, I'm filled with sin. but why do you allow me to stray so far from you, my God, through a cursed, diabolical spirit? My God, have mercy on me!" (CCD:XI:127).

²⁰ CCD:I:338; this is a difficult text to interpret and so I opt for the more kindly interpretation.

²¹ Cf. IRRAZÁBAL, Gustavo. "El tiempo de la misericordia"
http://www.revistacriterio.com.ar/bloginst_new/2015/10/02/el-tiempo-de-la-misericordia/

his second encyclical to this theme, *Dives in Misericordia*. Benedict XVI developed this same theme in his encyclicals, *Deus caritas est* and *Caritas in veritate*.

When Pope Francis proclaimed this Holy Year of Mercy, there was a feeling that something new was happening. That is, recent popes have taken a positive position with regard to mercy (and there is no doubt about that), but they have not always been consistent, especially with regard to some of their appointments and with regard to some of the groups that they promoted. Furthermore, it also seemed that most of their efforts were directed toward upholding current doctrine and teaching.

In the messages of Pope Francis, the focus has been on mercy. The references to truth are known and understood by everyone. Therefore, there is no need to “hunt down” the latest theologian who has made some strange assertion, no need to assert the truth in some document that is then published for the whole Church. There seems to be an effort to create an environment that is similar to that which Jesus promoted.

What about ourselves? The Congregation of the Mission, like other Vincentian institutions, wants to be a manifestation of God’s mercy. In fact, we could call ourselves, “children of mercy.” As Vincentians, in all our various ministries, we ought to be ambassadors of God’s mercy in the midst of this world of poverty. Furthermore, we ought to reveal the tenderness of God’s love. People suffer greatly and live as best they can. They do not need pastoral ministers who constantly remind them of the fact that they are sinners, that they are bad and will be punished for the bad that they do. We often forget that we ourselves are not “very normal.”

Vincent de Paul invites us to continue to cultivate a merciful heart. He invites us never to lose our smile, our gentleness, our tenderness. Let us not tire of ministering with the poor and let us become friends with them! Mercy refers to a form of love that is proper to a mother, an aspect that highlights gratitude, tenderness, patience, compassion, and a willingness to forgive. Vincent insisted that those who were involved in charitable works should listen with love to the cries of the poor and the infirm.²² He invited his followers to enter into a dynamic

²² ... *serve the sick poor with great gentleness and cordiality, sympathizing with them in their sufferings and listening to their little complaints, as a good mother should because they look upon you as their nursing mothers and as persons sent by God to assist them. So, you're destined to represent the Goodness of God to those poor people. Now, since the Divine Goodness deals with the afflicted in a gentle, charitable manner; so the sick poor should be treated as this same Goodness teaches you, that is, with gentleness, compassion, and love; for they are your masters, and mine as well* (CCD:X:267-268).

relationship with others, a relationship that would achieve its culmination when one's whole life became a gift to others.

In light of today's theology, it can be said that God forgives and assists. That is the best manner to eliminate unjust situations. God is good toward those who have fallen. This year presents us with a wonderful opportunity to practice the spiritual and the corporal works of mercy. But we must do this in a way that leads to social change so that all people can rejoice in their God-given human rights. The proof that we will have achieved this goal will be seen at the conclusion of the Holy Year. It will be seen when we continue to practice mercy.

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