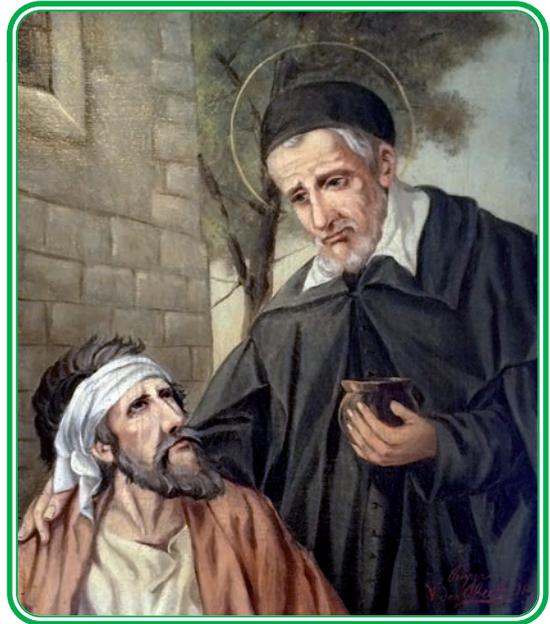


VINCENTIANA



60th Year - N. 1
January-March 2016

Mercy in Our Vincentian Being

CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION
GENERAL CURIA

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VINCENTIANA

60th Year - N. 1 January-March 2016

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Editor's Note

This year, 2016, has been designated as a Year of Mercy and it would be impossible to allow this event to pass us by without making some mention of it in the official publication of the Congregation of the Mission. Therefore, the reflections that are presented here in this first edition of 2016 revolve around the theme that has been proposed to us by Pope Francis, namely, mercy. During the Penitential Service that was celebrated in Saint Peter's Basilica (8 December 2015), the Pope referred to the Church as a house that welcomes everyone and rejects no one. Paraphrasing the Holy Father, we could say the same about the Congregation of the Mission: this is the house that welcomes every confrere and rejects no one.

With regard to information from the Curia, we include in these pages the decrees of the Superior General concerning the reconfiguration of the Provinces of France and Italy and the decree erecting the Vice-Province of Cameroon. In order to make you aware of our exact number, we include here the statistics that correspond to the year 2015. We also publish other information relative to the Congregation, for example a report on the last "*Tempo Forte*."

The section that refers to the Superior General includes his message and his homily on the occasion of the erection of the Province of the Vincentian Missionaries of Italy, his letter inviting the Visitors of the Congregation and the Daughters of Charity to suggest an Advisor for the Vincentian Marian Youth, his letter of 3 February, announcing a change of the date for the celebration of the feast of Saint Louise de Marillac, and his Lenten Letter (which emphasizes prayer and fasting).

In the section "of current interest," there appears an article written by the Procurator General on the Privileges of the Congregation of the Mission. There is also an article written by Father Joseph Agostino entitled "Appreciative Discernment," another tool that we should be mindful of during the 2016 General Assembly.

There are five articles that develop the theme of mercy from the perspective of Vincentian spirituality. The first is by Father Bernard Koch, *Monsieur Vincent, the Apostle of Mercy*; followed by an article by Father Paulino Sáez, *The Value of Mercy in Saint Vincent de Paul*. There is also an article by Father Andrés Motto, *Mercy as Part of our Being as Vincentians*, an article by Father Benito Martínez, *Vincentian Mercy*, and finally, an article written by Father Mario Di Carlo, *God's Mercy and the Vincentian Charism*.

We hope that this material will be useful to you and enhance your reflections during this Year of Mercy. We also hope that all the confreres and all our readers will find this material helpful for your own formation.

Father Álvaro Mauricio Fernández M., C.M.
Director of *Vincentiana*

Translated: Charles T. Plock, C.M.

1

From the General Curia

Decree of Erection of the Province of France

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General of the
Congregation of the
Mission,

with the consent of the
General Council, in
conformity with Article
107, 3° of our
Constitutions,
suppresses the canonical
Provinces of Paris and
Toulouse, and erects the
PROVINCE OF FRANCE
on this 25 January 2016.
In conformity with our
Constitutions and Statutes,
the new Province will have
all the rights and
obligations of the Provinces of the Congregation of the Mission.



Rome, 25 January 2016

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General

Giuseppe Turati, C.M.
Secretary General

Decree of Erection of the Province of the Vincentian Missionaries of Italy

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General of the
Congregation of the
Mission,

With the consent of the members of the General Council, according to Article 107, 3° of our Constitutions, by the present, erects, on the date of 25 January 2016, the PROVINCE OF THE VINCENTIAN MISSIONARIES OF ITALY, which will have all the rights and obligations of the Congregation of the Mission according to our Constitutions and Statutes.



Rome, 25 January 2016

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General

Giuseppe Turati, C.M.
Secretary General

Decree of Erection of the Region of Cameroon in Vice-Province of Cameroon

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General of the
Congregation of the
Mission,
with the consent of the
General Council and
in conformity with
Article 107, 3° of our
Constitutions,
erects the
VICE-PROVINCE OF
THE CAMEROON
on this 7 February
2016.

In conformity with our
Constitutions and
Statutes,
the Vice-Province will have all the rights and obligations of the
Provinces of the Congregation of the Mission.

Rome, 7 February 2016

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General

Giuseppe Turati, C.M.
Secretary General



2015 Annual Statistics of the Congregation of the Mission

MINISTRIES

Number of confreres involved in the ministries listed below. Each confrere is counted only once, considered under his principal ministry, as of 31 December 2015

MINISTRY	BISHOPS	PRIESTS	DEACONS	BROTHERS	STUDENTS
01. Parish (popular) Missions to the faithful	2	102		3	
02. Parishes	4	935	14	22	7
03. Pilgrimage sanctuaries		53	1	7	
04. Seminaries and clerical formation		248	7	6	7
05. Missions Ad Gentes	2	202	4	6	2
06. Missions for long term		49	3		2
07. Daughters of Charity (Director, chaplain)		88			
08. Schools (primary, secondary, superior, professional)		162	2	10	
09. Social Communications (publications, radio, television)		21		3	
10. Special studies		81	4	2	4
11. Chaplains (military, immigrants, hospital, associations)		127	1	2	
12. Chaplains (Vincentian Lay Groups)		80			
13. Direct Service of the Poor		38	2	8	
14. Manual work		2		22	
15. Administration	7	130	1	9	
16. Retired, ill, convalescing	8	315		29	
17. Other	11	128	7	7	20
18. Absence from the Congregation		158	4	5	1
TOTAL	34	2919	50	141	43

PROVINCES	HOUSES & INCORPORATED MEMBERS - 2015							ADMITTED MEMBERS & ASPIRANTS - 2015									
	Houses	Bishops	Priests	Deacons	Permanent Diacons	Brothers	Students with vows	TOTAL MEMBERS	MEMBERS WHO HAVE ALREADY MADE THE INTERNAL SEMINARY			MEMBERS WHO ARE STILL IN THE INTERNAL SEMINARY			TOTAL ADMITTED	ASPIRANTS	
									CP	P*	PD*	CP	CB	P*	PD*		
Italy - Turin	12		59	1	1			61								0	1
Poland	27	2	246	4		3		255	8							8	
Portugal	9	1	43					44								0	
Slovakia	6		33	1		4		38	3							3	1
Slovenia	8	2	38			2		42								0	2
Spain - Barcelona	6	1	35			1		37				2				2	5
Spain - Madrid	12		83			11		94	1							1	1
Spain - Salamanca	12		67			8		75	2			2				4	1
Spain - Zaragoza	15		95			2		97				4				4	3
Saints Cyril and Methodius	7	1	26					27	1							1	2
OCEANIA	6	0	40	1	0	3	3	47	5	0	0	12	0	0	0	17	1
Australia	6		40	1		3	3	47	5			12				17	1
TOTAL	508	34	2919	47	3	141	43	3187	167	1	0	225	2	0	0	395	474

CP = Candidates to the Priesthood; CB = Candidates to the Brotherhood; P*/PD* = Priests/Permanent Diacons coming from a diocese or another Institute.

* Holland: From 1 August 2015, it is no longer a Province but belongs to the General Curia as a Canonical House.

Tempo Forte Circular

29 February - 4 March 2016

*“... mercy, that beautiful virtue of which it’s said, ‘Mercy is the distinctive feature of God.’ We practice it, too, and must do so all our lives: corporal mercy, spiritual mercy, mercy in the rural areas and in the missions by hastening to meet the needs of our neighbor, mercy when we’re at home with regard to the retreatants, and with regard to the poor, by teaching them the things necessary for salvation...
(CCD, XI, 328).*

Dear Confreres,

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

We began our *Tempo Forte* with a Lenten reflection on Sunday, 28 February, given by Father Mario DiCarlo. The theme was: the Year of Mercy and our Vincentian vocation. We had other guest speakers during this *Tempo Forte*. The first was a presentation by the Finance Commission. The final presentation was given by the President of the Franz Foundation, Father Robert Maloney.

A. In our regular matters of business we discussed the following:

1. We reviewed the evaluations from the New Visitors’ Meeting. The Superior General shared with the members of the Council the interviews that he had with the new Visitors who were present. After the evaluation, we made some recommendations: 1) have more in-depth discussion regarding the Vincentian Family, the Daughters of Charity, the question of exception, relationships with bishops, and confreres in difficult situations. For this final item, we suggest using different examples as to how Visitors might be able to handle these situations; 2) increase the time allowed for mediation in common; and 3) give confreres the opportunity to arrive earlier or depart later,

so that they have an opportunity to get to know something of the Eternal City.

2. **Continuing preparation for our 2016 General Assembly.** Our main focus is going to be on New Evangelization and we are asking that that be guided by a member of the Congregation of the Mission, who has some expertise with regard to this subject from the Vincentian perspective, as well as the capability of communicating well that information. We also are making recommendations to the General Assembly for Moderators, selecting one from each of the three languages, English, French, and Spanish. Likewise, we are recommending to the General Assembly, three confreres for the Synthesis Committee, again from the three major languages of the Congregation. We will sit at round tables to assist at promoting conversation and dialog. All the Assistants General will be scattered among the Visitors and delegates of the General Assembly. We have prepared a letter asking the Holy Father for a message, as well as a letter to the Cardinal Archbishop of Chicago, inviting him to be present with us for a Eucharist and meal.
3. **Reconfiguration.** We discussed the process that is evolving between the US Eastern Province and the US New England Province. At this point, a new commission has been formed to help them improve ways that confreres from each province might get to know one another better.
4. **New Superior General and his Council.** We spent some time drawing up a list of things for them to consider with different degrees of urgency. One of these is the role of the Assistants General and the process of accompanying the various provinces, so that it might be more fruitful than it has been in the past. Special attention will be given to the International Missions regarding the selection of candidates. For the next *Tempo Forte*, each Assistant will prepare a reflection on a theme of his competence in order that that might be passed on to the new Superior General and his Council. The same goes for the Treasurer General and the Secretary General.
5. We considered the reflection of the Union of Superiors General regarding the next Synod of Bishops. The request is that it be in two parts, the first being more a Synod of the People of God, in which the bishops would listen, and in the second session, they would act according to what they heard from the people of God.

6. We then had a report from the special commission that was set up to accompany the **Province of Congo** in its growth as a province of the Congregation of the Mission.

B. The General Curia

1. We have been asked to accompany the Saint Vincent de Paul Society during its General Assembly at the beginning of June.
2. We studied a report from the **Director of the Office of Communications**, Father Jorge Rodríguez, with the process that will be used prior, during, and after the General Assembly, so that there might be more fluid communication of the happenings during that event with the rest of the membership of the Congregation. We have made a major decision to move the publication of our magazine, *Vincentina*, to the Milagrosa Publishing House in Madrid, with the hope of realizing substantial savings in the publication costs.
3. **CIF Program**. We have named a new Director. Father Daniel Borlik has served faithfully for five years and will be finishing at the end of 2016. He will be transitioning, together with his assistant, Father Adam Bandura, with our confrere from the Province of Argentina, Father Andrés Motto Gaglia. We also received from the Director and Subdirector some recommendations as to how we might revitalize the CIF program in order to attract confreres so that they might participate faithfully in ongoing formation that is certainly required for all of us that our ministry in evangelization and service of the poor might be in optimum condition.
4. We reviewed the report from the **Director of the Vincentian Solidarity Office (VSO)**. Father Miles continues to solicit funds for provinces that request assistance in finding funding for different projects. We urge confreres, especially the Visitors, to take advantage of the Vincentian Solidarity Office and the offers that it can make possible.
5. We received from Father Claudio Santangelo a report on the **Working Group on Interreligious Dialog**. This group hopes to promote a seminar for all those serving in situations where it is important that relationships between Muslims and Christians be developed and deepened. There is a tentative plan for this to be held in one of our missions in Africa.

6. We received an updated report from Father Claudio Santangelo on the new initiative that will be undertaken during the General Assembly of our thrust to opening **Missions in the Muslim World**. Father Claudio made visits to the countries of Mauritania and Tunisia. Daughters of Charity work in Mauritania and both the Daughters and the confreres work in Tunisia. At this point, we are establishing a new mission in Tunisia, in the city of Sousse, which will be manned by Father Claudio Santangelo of the Province of the Vincentian Missionaries of Italy and Father Fadi Bassil of the Province of the Orient. This mission will begin after the General Assembly, most likely during the month of August. We are grateful to both Fathers Fadi and Claudio for their availability for service in this International Mission.

C. Different Themes

1. We had a very long discussion on the development of a **solidarity fund**, especially for our developing provinces. We hope that this discussion will be deepened in the General Assembly, because it has been quite evident to all of us in past years of the difference that exists between those who have and those who have not in the Congregation of the Mission. We want to do all in our power to break that double standard and promote a sense of solidarity with one another.

D. Economic questions.

1. We approved the **budgets of the International Missions** of Angola, Benin, Chad, El Alto (Bolivia), Papua New Guinea, Punta Arenas (Chile), the Solomon Islands, Tunisia, and Alaska (USA), as well as the support that we will give to our CIF program and to the two vicariates of Ethiopia. Of the ten International Missions, two are self-sustaining, those which are in the extreme parts of America: Alaska and Punta Arenas. The other self-sustaining mission is Cochabamba, Bolivia. We hope to move toward all the International Missions being self-sustaining, but oftentimes that is difficult because of the poor economic conditions in the particular countries and the very little support that is received from the bishops.
2. We had a special guest, the president of the company that does the review of our accounting. Barbara Zielinski was here to give us an

overall view of the administration these past 12 years, together with the coordinator of the Financial Commission, a layman, Mr. Thomas Beck. We discussed the need to look for other means of income, other than depending on the market, because the market is so unstable. We hope to be able to undertake an in-depth study of the financial situation of each of the provinces.

E. International Missions

1. In **Bolivia**, there is a change of mission. Father Luis Miguel Montaña, a Bolivian from the Province of Chile, has moved from the mission in Cochabamba and will now be the fourth member of the team in El Alto.
2. We discussed the International Mission of **Papua New Guinea**. It has a good number of confreres working pastorally in three different dioceses. We are also responsible for the Interdiocesan Seminary.
3. We then discussed the **Solomon Islands**, which is presently made up of five confreres, but one of them, Father Gregory Cooney, will be leaving in June. He has generously served in the mission beyond the call of duty. We are most grateful for his accompaniment. We hope to receive some further support from the APVC, as well as from any other confrere who might be willing to give some time, even a semester, to teach, in order to support this mission.
4. We discussed the International Mission of **Angola**, which the Superior General will be visiting shortly. One of the members is ready to move on to a new assignment. Therefore, we are searching for a third member for that community.
5. With regard to the mission in **Chad**, we now have grown from three members to five members. The Congregation of the Mission has been given charge of the minor seminary in the diocese where our house is established. Two confreres, both from Congo, will be staffing that minor seminary.
6. With regard to **Tunisia**, we are waiting for a new confrere to arrive in order to substitute for the present superior of the mission, Father Firmin Mola Mbalo, who has been relieved of his responsibilities in this mission to undertake other duties.
7. We received a report from the confreres in the mission in **Alaska**. At this point, there are just two confreres there, one from the

Province of Colombia and the superior from the Western Province USA. The archbishop is moving forward with a desire for an even greater commitment on the part of the Congregation, especially to serve those who are Latin Americans working in different parts of Alaska, as well as Filipinos.

8. **Candidates.** We then looked at the various candidates who have offered to go either to International Missions or missions of our different provinces. All together we discussed eight candidates, of whom we hope four will be placed in an International Mission between now and mid-year.
9. **Mission Request.** We then studied one new request for missionaries for Belize City. We received a letter from the bishop and auxiliary bishop, asking for confreres to serve in this mission that is both English and Spanish-speaking to work with the immigrant population in Belize and to accompany the Daughters of Charity and other branches of the Vincentian Family that are present there. The Congregation of the Mission has never served in Belize. It is located in Central America and because it is a former colony of Great Britain it is not considered to be a part of Central America.
10. We also discussed two missions that are pending. One is **Beni, Bolivia**. We hope to be able to place two confreres there on an *ad experimentum* basis from September until the end of the year, with the possibility of assuming that mission, being assisted and oriented by the Daughters of Charity, who will be withdrawing from that area. We also have a request from our confrere-bishop, Fernando Barbosa, of **Tefé in Amazonia, Brazil**, who has asked for the assistance of confreres. Our hope is that we might have a confrere, from the Province of Colombia, to accompany that mission, which is one of the poorest dioceses in all of Brazil. We hope too for another confrere from one of the Brazilian provinces. We encourage those in the area to take a deep interest in this mission, which is very much a part of and speaks clearly to our charism.

F. The Vincentian Family

1. The Superior General shared with us his impressions of the most recent Vincentian Family Executive Committee Meeting and the International Leaders Meeting, which were held in Rome in January. There are now seven congregations on the Vincentian Family Executive Committee; we have added three: the Brothers of

Our Lady, Mother of Mercy; the Federation of the Sisters of Charity of Strasbourg; and the Federation of the Sisters of Charity of Canada and the United States. We also discussed the new theme for the coming year, especially in light of the 400th anniversary of the birth of the charism and very much connected with the Year of Mercy. As a Vincentian Family, we want to focus on Matthew 25, particularly verse 35, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” The request is to have all the members of the Vincentian Family study in depth who are the strangers in their midst and how they might be able to serve them, responding to this most important motivation that comes from the Gospel and spoke very much to the heart of Saint Vincent de Paul.

2. We then spoke about the new **Vincentian Family Office**, which is now in Philadelphia. Coordinating it, under the responsibility of the Vincentian Family Executive Committee, is Father Joseph Agostino from the Eastern USA Province, together with Father Flavio Pereira from the Province of Central America and Sister Margaret Marie Clifford, a Daughter of Charity from the Province of Saint Louis, USA.

G. Updating of our calendars.

To date, we only have three more canonical visitations to be undertaken: that of Rio de Janeiro will be done this month until the end of April by Father Javier Álvarez; Father Zeracristos will do that of the Province of North India from 9 April until 6 May; and Father Eli Chaves will be in the Province of Saragossa from 15 March until 28 April.

The calendar of the Superior General for the months of April, May, and June is as follows. After visiting northeast India, Singapore, Sydney, the Solomon Islands, and Papua New Guinea in the month of March, Father Greg will be in Paris for the renewal of the vows of the Daughters of Charity and from there he will leave immediately for Angola. Then, in the middle of April, from 15-23, he will be in Vietnam. From the 23rd into the beginning of May, he will be in Taiwan and continental China. During the month of May, on the 2nd and 3rd, he will be at the CIF program, followed by a short visit to the mission in Albania. In Naples, he will participate in a Vincentian Family activity. Together with all the other members of the General Council, there will be a year-end retreat in Jerusalem,

followed by an evaluation of their six years of service and a day for recreation. Immediately after this retreat, the Superior General will go to Holland in order to show his gratitude to the missionaries for their missionary thrust. At the end of May, from the 20th to the 31st, the Superior General will visit the Province of the Daughters of Charity in Recife and then visit the Daughters of Charity and confreres in Amazonia, in particular the mission of our confrere-bishop in Tefé. In the month of June, he will participate in the beginning of the General Assembly for the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. He will be in Tunis to see how that mission is going and how its new work will be undertaken. He has a visit to the Community in Dialog, one of the missions of the Province of the Vincentian Missionaries in Italy. He then departs for Chicago for the General Assembly, after which he will take his vacation and then participate in a program of priestly and ministerial renewal in San Antonio, Texas, from the middle of August to the middle of December. While there, he hopes to discern what God wants of him, as he begins a new phase in his life.

“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

2

From the Superior General

Meeting of the New Visitors

Homily

11 January 2016

by: G. Gregory Gay, C.M.

Readings: 1 Samuel 1:1-8

Mark 1:14-20

The kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel!

Repent, change your attitude, change your way of thinking and acting and then Jesus calls Simon and his brother Andrew, calls James and his brother John. There seems to be no coincidence that the call to personal conversion should be followed by Jesus's invitation to follow him. Here we have Jesus who had spent most of his waking days in his carpenter's workshop and now he is about to begin his public life. Jesus himself had to be aware of the fact that this was going to involve many changes in his own life and he himself needed to change his own thinking, his own attitudes, and his own way of acting.

Look at what Jesus would have to confront during the next three years. His disciples discover that some other individuals were driving out demons and healing people in the name of Jesus and so they ask: *should we put a stop to this; who are they to be acting in that manner?* On another occasion when Jesus and the disciples were not welcomed into one of the towns that they were visiting, the disciples exhort Jesus to rain down fire and brimstone and destroy those ungrateful persons.

Yet, these same individuals at the time of the transfiguration are in awe and exclaim: *how good it is for us to be here.* Nevertheless, as they descend the mountain and continue their journey they enter into a discussion about who is the greatest and who will occupy what places in this new kingdom. Over and over again the disciples seemed unable to grasp the meaning of Jesus's words and actions; so much so that at

the last hour, when they had all stated that they would never abandon Jesus, what do we see? Peter denies that he knew Jesus, Judas betrays him, and the others all run away and lock themselves in the upper room for fear that they too might suffer the same fate.

I have no doubt that as Jesus began his Galilean ministry he saw that he would have to change many things in his own life. As he called those first disciples, James and John, Simon and Andrew, a life-altering change occurred. Now Jesus would have to inspire and encourage his followers *to be more*, that is, to be men of prayer; to reach out to the Samaritans, to lepers, to prostitutes, tax collectors, and sinners; to forgive their enemies seventy times seven.

How was all of this to be accomplished? Jesus did not lecture the disciples, but he taught them by his own example:

- Jesus engaged in prayer with his Father and when the disciples asked for a methodology he responded: when you pray say *Our Father*;
- Jesus conversed with the Samaritan woman at the well; he ate with tax collectors and sinners and healed lepers;
- Jesus, as he was dying on the cross, cried out: *Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing*.

It was Jesus's ability to enter into the world of the poor that enabled him to understand the disciples' limitations, while at the same time challenging them by placing greater demands before them.

As Visitors you are presented with the same challenge. The mission that the Congregation entrusts to you as Visitor will not be achieved unless you are a spiritual man capable of leading spiritual men. Vincent de Paul referred to that mission as the "art of arts."¹

In your ministry as Visitor you are going to have to deal with confreres who are enthusiastic about their ministry and others, who because of declining health, are unable to minister as they once did; with confreres who might be ill and need greater assistance in going about their daily routines; with confreres who might be dealing with any number of addictions; with confreres who cannot seem to get along with others and create a problem in community living. Yes, there are so many different situations that you will have to confront and like

¹ *A Practical Guide for the Visitor*, Congregation of the Mission, General Curia, Rome, 1998, p. 14.

Jesus you are invited to open yourself to the Spirit and clothe yourself in new attitudes, in a new way of thinking, and a new way of acting. It becomes important that you listen to the confreres, listen with your ears and your heart. It is equally important that you view situations from the perspective of the poor. Such a vision will enable you to ask: *Lord, if you were in my place, what would you say or what would you do on this occasion?*

To view reality from the perspective of the poor will also enable you to be merciful and understanding of the confreres, will enable you to be a leader and a member, a father and a brother, a teacher of the faith and a fellow disciple of Christ, one who promotes the perfection of the confreres and a true witness of holiness.²

I would like to close with the same words that Vincent de Paul spoke to Antoine Durand at the time that he was appointed superior at the seminary in Agde: *I ask Our Lord to bless your leadership and I ask you, on your part, to join me in praying that He'll forgive me all the faults I myself have committed in my own ministry.*³

² *Ibid*, p. 15.

³ *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. 316.

Homily 19 January 2016

by: G. Gregory Gay, C.M.

Readings: *1 Samuel 16:1-13*

Mark 2:23-28

God called and sent Samuel on a mission: a mission filled with danger and uncertainty, a mission which demanded him to put aside his usual way of thinking and viewing reality, a mission in which he would allow God to lead him: *not as man sees does God see because man sees the appearance but God looks at the heart.*

You have also been called and sent on a mission and your mission is also filled with danger and risk. Yours is a mission of leading spiritual men, a mission of leading apostolic men, a mission of promoting the Vincentian charism. You have the primary responsibility to insure that the Vincentian charism is lived, safe-guarded, deepened, and constantly developed by the confreres.

What an incredible mission and, if that is not enough

- You have an important responsibility in promoting unity and collaboration among the various branches of the extended Vincentian Family;
- You have the responsibility of maintaining close communion with national and regional church organizations;
- You have the responsibility of maintaining contact with other superiors of Institutes of Consecrated Life and/or Societies of Apostolic Life;
- Each year the Visitor shall correct the information contained in the *Catalogue*;
- The Visitor has the responsibility of informing the General Curia about specific matters and receiving approbation for other matters;
- The Visitor shall provide the most adequate means for initial and ongoing formation;
You are also exhorted to express your brotherly and timely concern to help confreres who are struggling with problems.

Yes, you could easily throw up your arms in discouragement and say:

This is impossible! Send me home right away to my province and I will recommend another confrere to take my place and I promise, I really promise, to share with him all the information that was given to me during these days of my stay here in Rome!

But, no, there is no reason to go to that extreme and I very much want you to continue in this role of leadership and I also want you to continue to engage in this most challenging mission. So then, let me offer you one simple means to deal with all of the different tasks that you will have to confront as Visitor: the Provincial Plan.

This plan, developed with the input of the confreres, the people who are served, the members of the wider Vincentian Family, and all those who minister with you, will provide you with a focus during the time of your term of office. The Provincial Plan enables you to establish priorities and goals as well as develop strategies that will enable you to concretize specific lines of action and all of this will enable you to serve in a more effective and efficient manner.

Almost 50 years ago the Bishops in Latin America outlined a specific methodology for developing such a pastoral plan, a methodology which I believe is still valid. It involves six steps: [1] a study of the reality in which one ministers (here one seeks technical collaboration of organizations and experts; here one also listens to the voices of the poor); [2] reflection on the reality that is discovered (again, this reflection is done with all the interested parties); [3] analyzing available human and material resources; [4] determining priorities; [5] elaboration of the plan; [6] periodic evaluation and adjustment. Without such a plan you will find yourself running from one project to another, from one commitment to another with no clear direction, and, at the same time, unable to provide others with a vision for the future.

Hopefully, most of you, if not all of you, have in place a Provincial Plan and, therefore, you are now involved in the task of evaluating it and refining it. As you go about this task, I encourage you to be mindful of the two recent documents published by Pope Francis, *Laudato si*, and *Evangelii gaudium*, as well as the Lines of Action promulgated by our last General Assembly. Regardless of what new Lines of Action may be established during the deliberations of our next

General Assembly, there is no doubt about our need to continue to foster creative fidelity to our mission and ministries.

As you engage in this process, I also urge you to be mindful of the words of Blessed Oscar Romero: *We cannot do everything, yet it is liberating to begin. This gives us the strength to do something and to do it well. It may remain incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way. It is an opportunity for the grace of God to enter and to do the rest. It may be that we will never see its completion, but that is the difference between the master and the laborer. We are laborers, not master builders, servants, not the Messiah. We are prophets of a future that does not belong to us.*

Vincentian Family Gathering

Homily Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

by: G. Gregory Gay, C.M.

Readings: *Nehemiah 8:2-4a, 5-6, 8-10*
1 Corinthians 12:12-30
Luke 1:1-4, 4:14-21

During these days we have reflected on the theme of collaboration, a most appropriate theme given the fact that we are in the midst of celebrating a Year of Collaboration. As we come to the end of our time together, the Scripture readings affirm all that we have spoken about.

Though many, we are one and as one family, our mission is clear:
To proclaim Good News to the poor.

Today's readings, boldly and with great precision, describe our Vincentian identity. As Jesus began his public ministry he opted, in a preferential manner, for those persons who were the forgotten members of society: the lepers, the infirm, sinners, tax collectors, foreigners, widows, children. Jesus told all these individuals that they were blessed, that they held a privileged position in his kingdom, that they were more precious than the birds of the air and the lilies of the field and most importantly he told them that, because they were his friends, he would lay down his life for them so that they might have the fullness of life.

We see, then, that as Jesus (and later his disciples) focused their energy on the mission, their numbers and the community of believers increased.

At the present time, we often hear some Family members express a concern about their smaller numbers and/or the aging of their

members. In one sense I can understand that concern and yet, at the same time, I am convinced that such a concern is irrelevant.

In fact, I am more convinced that

- as we dedicate ourselves to the mission of proclaiming good news;
- as we become involved in projects with other branches of the family;
- as these projects tear down and destroy and lay waste to the structures of injustice and oppression and exclusion;
- as our collaborative efforts proclaim good news rather than restate those discouraging words: “but we have always done things this way!”
- as we allow ourselves to become bruised and hurting and dirty as a result of being involved with people on the street;
- as we adapt a pastoral approach rather than a mere administrative approach ...

as we do all of this, then those concerns about numbers and age quickly fade away and disappear into the background. We soon discover that our involvement in a common mission and our willingness to minister together becomes a light that draws and attracts other people into our ranks. Our enthusiasm and zeal become contagious. We ourselves will find a new energy that we never thought we had. We begin to establish new relationships and we find ourselves ministering side by side with people whom we never imagined as our allies.

Speaking about allies, let me add a note. As we enter into these new alliances with people, we must also be aware of the fact that we will also create enemies. That is only natural, because when we proclaim good news to the poor, the rich and the powers that be will feel threatened and they will wage battle against us. But also remember: there are no permanent enemies and there are no permanent allies. Today’s enemy can easily become our ally in tomorrow’s struggle and today’s ally could also become our enemy in the next struggle.

Collaboration and systemic change, some people have accused me of speaking too frequently about these themes and yet I feel as though I can never say enough about these realities. You see, I have a vision of the kingdom where men and women of every race, creed, religious

belief can live together as brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of the One God. Furthermore, I believe that the kingdom will become more alive in our midst to the degree that we, together as Vincentians, make our unique contribution to the building up of that kingdom. What is that unique contribution?

Affective and effective ministry, ministry together as one Family, ministry that combines charity and justice as we continue to serve our Lords and Masters, those men and women who are poor. During one of his lectures on commercial law, Frederic Ozanam stated: *Charity alone is not sufficient. Charity treats the wounds but does not stop the blows that cause them ... charity is the Samaritan who pours oil on the wounds of the traveler who has been attacked. It is justice's role to prevent the attacks.*

As we reflect on the word of God that has been proclaimed in our midst this morning, I would hope that we, like the people who gathered around Nehemiah, would listen attentively to what God is saying to us; would bless the Lord and cry out saying: Amen! Amen!. Then, in the words of Pope Francis, may we go forth, arm in arm with others, rejoicing with those who rejoice, weeping with those who weep, building together a new world (cf. *Evangeli Gaudium*, #269). Then, once again may we come together, listen attentively to what God is saying to us, cry out our affirmation, and continue to build that new world and then... This is just the beginning!!!

Homily
for the Erection of the Province of the
Vincentian Missionaries of Italy
25 January 2016

Readings: *Acts 22:3-16*

Mark 16:15-18

On 25 January 1617, Vincent de Paul gave a sermon as he had so often done in his life, but that sermon was a very special moment in his life and represented a new beginning, a conversion, of his life: to give life to popular missions and devote his life to the evangelization of the poor.

Today, 400 years later on this very day, the Vincentians of Italy, faithful to the charism of their founder, celebrate the Eucharist in which the successor of Saint Vincent is preaching. I hope to heaven it is once again the beginning of a new reality, of new evangelization of the poor, and a true conversion of the Italian Vincentians, faithful to their vocation as evangelizers of the poor.

Yes, my dear confreres, there is a need for a conversion, like that of Saint Vincent and that of Saint Paul which we celebrate in our liturgy today. It is not just an ordinary celebration due to the circumstances. Today emerges a new reality, at least that is what I ask of God in this Eucharist. If 400 years ago a sermon motivated Saint Vincent de Paul to a commitment which he had faith in all of his life, today with these words I would like to motivate you to a commitment that represents a turning point for the future of the sons of Saint Vincent in Italy.

The reconfiguration of the three Italian Provinces, which began decades ago, today reaches a fundamental stage. Yes, a stage, not its conclusion. The erection of the new Province of Italy cannot be understood as a step toward something that continues like before, only changing things externally or superficially.

The liturgy we are celebrating can orient us toward understanding that what is happening (or may occur, if we allow the Spirit of the Lord

to work in us) is something that revolutionizes our lives. The conversion of Saint Paul represented a new horizon in the early Church. With him, the Church became truly “catholic”; that is to say, universal.

His conversion was not of small importance: it was not that before his conversion he lived a dissolute life, indeed he was a very rigorous observant of the Jewish law and a passionate believer in God. But that day on the Damascus road completely changed his “idea” of God and, consequently, his way of being and living as a believer, changing things around him, by introducing something really new into the life of the Church and evangelization.

My dear brothers this is what you are called to do today as the Vincentians of Italy. I invite you not to passively accept the birth of your new province, perhaps with good interior dispositions that you can put to use at the will of the superiors when it counts. Rather, I invite you to live this new birth with courage, creativity, and a spirit of faith. In fact, this is a good opportunity to change the course of our lives, to give new impetus to our mission as evangelizers, and to convert our lives to a new dimension of our being Vincentians.

Inspired by the Word of God, let me suggest a couple of possible ways for this to happen in you.

Firstly, the Gospel today tells us, “Go into all the world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature.” My dear brothers, my first invitation is to overcome every kind of provincialism, which is still so present in many provinces of the Congregation, and in the past has also characterized the Italian provinces. It is time to move to a new dimension, that of internationality or interculturalism to which our next General Assembly will call us. Saint Vincent did not want sedentary missionaries who promoted ecclesial institutions that did not reach out to more people; he wanted missionaries who were willing to go into the world. We would not be good Vincentians today if we did not make an effort to move from the south to the north of Italy or vice versa.

Secondly, what we are celebrating today represents true newness in the life of the Vincentians of Italy and is suggested in the first reading. Saint Paul, thrown from his horse to the ground, does not lose heart, does not let himself be overcome by fear, but asks, “Who are you, sir?” And later he asks, “What shall I do, sir?” Do not take for granted knowing who the Lord is and what he wants from us. Even Saint Paul thought he knew the God of Israel and did his will. But his conversion

represented a new way of seeing God and acting in his name. Dear brothers, we should not be afraid of our conversion, of seeing with new eyes God's will for us and our mission in the Church. Without this conversion, it is unlikely that the reconfiguration of the Italian Provinces represents a newness of life, a new evangelization of the poor, and a more effective mission in the Church and in the world today.

My dear brothers, we have taken the first steps in the Year of Mercy. May the Lord grant us a profound experience of his mercy and be ourselves a sign of his mercy for all people in our time. Saint Paul, the Apostle of the Gentiles, teaches us where to go: to all the world. Saint Vincent teaches us how to get there: with mercy. We become aware of the beauty and timeliness of the vocation to which we are called and we respond with courage. Only one thing can hinder us: our fear. But if we are open to the grace of God, who makes all things new, we will rediscover a youth and an ardor we did not know we had. So be it.

**Message of the Superior General
on the Occasion of the Erection of the new
Province of the Congregation of the Mission in Italy
25 January 2016**

Dear Italian brothers, the two historical reports that were presented to us took us back in time to the origins of the Italian Vincentian missionaries and their diffusion in and out of Italy. Now, I would like to draw your attention to recent years and, just as important, to the present times and the future of the Vincentians in Italy.

Today we come to the end of a long journey, which led to the reconfiguration of the three Italian provinces into one. The way was long and the process of reconfiguration faced challenges and resistance, but at the same time, it was an exciting journey where new horizons were discovered and new hopes were raised. I can say that this journey officially began ten years ago, in 2006, according to a study published by the Province of Turin in 2012 titled, “Reconfiguration: Chronicle of a Journey.” That same study divided this journey into four stages, which I am not here to recall, and, in any case, they will be integrated into the next steps towards its publication (the 2012 memo).

I prefer to focus on the present and on what awaits us now. Today we celebrate not only a point of arrival but also a point of departure and the beginning of a new phase, one in which we will see the fruits of so many efforts made along this journey. They told me that Massimo D’Azeglio, a famous Italian from the Italian Unification period, said after the unification of Italy in 1861, “We have made Italy, now we must make Italians.” Today I would like to say the same thing for us: the Province of Italy is made, now we must make the Vincentian missionaries of Italy, as indeed we have chosen to call this new reality that is born today.

You know that it is easier to change external structures than internal ones. It is easier to change juridical and institutional structures than our mentality and habits, which might continue as before, even with the new exterior structures. Perhaps this is the first challenge we are

now called to face. It is not true that all is finished. Instead, it is true that the difficult work begins now! It is time to adjust our way of being, to evaluate and work with what we have tried hard to build on the long journey that brought us here. What you have built through meetings, discussions, and assemblies, you should now assimilate so that it becomes your natural way of life.

You also face a second challenge. The personal and cultural differences between you have not automatically disappeared: they are still present and must be recognized, but also they should be overcome in the name of what unites you, for what unites you is more important than what divides you. That which unites you is a common vocation, a same spirit, one mission: to evangelize in the name of Jesus Christ following the example of Saint Vincent. Everything else, everything that makes us different from each other, is a resource because this one mission should be understood not as single tone, but as polyphony that gathers the sounds of diversity into harmony. True reconfiguration is a work of art born from the music of an artist (and this can only be Jesus Christ, the Rule of our life) and by the people who interpret it creatively, under the guidance of a good manager.

Here then is a third challenge: to have an open mind, be courageous, and be able to imagine new ways and means for the presence and action of the Vincentian missionaries in Italy. In an interview a few years ago Pope Francis said, “The Jesuit must be a person of incomplete thought, of open-ended thinking...” and he went on to say, “...always thinks, again and again, looking at the horizon toward which he must go, with Christ at the center. This is his real strength. And that pushes the Society to be searching, creative, and generous”¹. If there is an affinity between our charism and that of the Jesuits, I think it can be identified precisely in this tension in search of new forms and directions in order always to express better our spirituality. If Christ is the center, our thinking is oriented toward a horizon that remains constantly open. The question we must ask ourselves is that posed by Saint Vincent, “How would Christ have acted in this situation?” Our life is not about the enforcement of a “rule” of life, but the following of the disciple whose eyes are constantly on the Master, always remaining open to life’s surprises and new challenges. Open-ended thinking moves us to live in the new peripheries, as Pope Francis recommended

¹ A. Spadaro, *La mia porta è sempre aperta. Una conversazione con Antonio Spadaro*, Rizzoli, Milano, 2013, 23.

in his Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People in 2014, when he said to them, “I also expect from you what I have asked all the members of the Church: to come out of yourselves and go forth to the existential peripheries. ‘Go into all the world’ (Mk 16:15); these were the last words which Jesus spoke to his followers and which he continues to address to us. A whole world awaits us”². So as not to be vague, the Pope goes on to say, “I ask you to work concretely in welcoming refugees, drawing near to the poor, and finding creative ways to catechize, to proclaim the Gospel, and to teach others how to pray. Consequently, I would hope that structures can be streamlined, large religious houses repurposed for works which better respond to the present demands of evangelization and charity, and apostolates adjusted to new needs”. We all know very well that there is a great need to infuse new energy and new enthusiasm in the confreres of the new Province of Italy. There is a good number of young confreres who wish to evangelize and serve the poor. They need the guidance and experience of older confreres. In the same vein as Pope Francis, I encourage you, as I did when speaking to the Visitors of CEVIM, to show yourselves clearly as those who proclaim the good news of the gospel to the poor. It is time to put drowsiness aside and to renew our missionary spirit, as the Constitutions ask of us. This, too, is an issue that will be discussed in the next General Assembly. The Assembly will focus mainly on New Evangelization and how we, who should be experts on the mission, are called to offer our part in New Evangelization today. The Pope urges us to be a Church going outward and doing missionary conversion. Italy has always been at the forefront in the work of evangelization and is especially known in many parts of the world for the popular missions. I would very much like this tradition to continue in the future. I do not know in what form. It is your job to find the forms most suitable to the current situation. But one thing is certain: the needs of the people are an appeal addressed to the Gospel. It is easy to do the opposite in our ministry, which is to consider the appeal that the Gospel addresses to people. We must learn to hear “the cry of the people” to God (cfr. Exodus 3:9), especially “the cry of the poor” and to understand how the Word of God should be announced precisely from this cry. I hope that the new Province of the Vincentian Missionaries of Italy will be able to respond to the cry of

²Apostolic letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to All Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life, 21 November 2014, II, 4.

³ *Ibid.*

the poor and their most urgent and actual needs, such as those of migrants who continually arrive in Italy: many times they live in very precarious conditions. I hope there will be a positive response on your side to the needs of these poor and to the phenomena in some way connected with them, like human trafficking, etc. There is a great need for evangelization and we could be the experts. Be good news for the poor, as suggested by Saint Vincent.

There is also a fourth challenge: we must be generative. The most serious risk to the consecrated life is sterility. Generativity is an essential characteristic of the Church, which is our mother. So too, the survival of a Society of Apostolic Life like ours is a question of an “option for fruitfulness and not for sterility.” To be fruitful is a question regarding “the mystery of paternity in the faith: there is no fruitfulness in faith, if you do not leave room for the action of God, the true Father makes those who desire it full of life”⁴. Being fruitful is one of the characteristics of each founding father of every institute and which is passed on to his children through the centuries.

The fifth challenge: to be with those who live “looking with fruitfulness towards the future and offering clear answers to the present. This is a very different attitude than those who take refuge in ‘it has always been done this way’⁵. It should neither be about a “restoration of antique shops,” as the traditionalists would like, nor about “laboratories of utopias,” as the progressives prefer. If our life becomes an ideology (no matter whether conservative or progressive), it becomes sterile. For this reason, the appeal of Pope Francis is not to live in some “utopia” but to “create ‘alternate spaces,’ where the Gospel approach of self-giving, fraternity, embracing differences, and love of one another can thrive”⁶.

Now, I will outline a sixth challenge facing the Vincentian missionaries of Italy: the creation of true places of fraternity and service that have the capacity to attract the younger generation in search of their pathway in life and to represent for them a convincing answer. As someone said, the crisis of vocations is perhaps more a crisis of the “vocation” in that it does not represent an attractive possibility for many young people, who are also looking for meaning in their life or how to achieve it in a beautiful gift and response to the

⁴ Spadaro, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 45.

⁶ Pope Francis, *op. cit.* II, 2.

practical needs of the people. I encourage you to involve as many young people as possible in the various ministries in which you will be concentrating your efforts and to make them feel they are important for the future of our ministry. Without young people witnessing your activities, your ministries will be destined to die in a short period of time. It is essential that the Vincentians in Italy have the ability to transmit the charism inherited from Saint Vincent in appropriate forms to new generations in the future.

The seventh challenge, with which I would like to conclude my talk, is the ability to share our charism with others. It is urgent that we learn to collaborate concretely with many people, especially with members of the Vincentian Family, who are at the forefront of service to the poor and defense of their rights and motivated by a deep spirituality and prayer life. With them, we can do great things as did Saint Vincent. Without them, we will do less and less and might risk the ultimate demise of a Vincentian presence in Italy. I invite you to work together with them, to find together new ways and forms of collaboration and of valuing the Vincentian laity.

Dear Brothers, these are the challenges I see now on the horizon of this new reality that today, as Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission, I inaugurate in Italy. I hope you can, with the help of the Lord, through the intercession of Saint Vincent de Paul (whose first intuition of the mission we celebrate today) and the Apostle Paul (whose conversion we celebrate), respond courageously to these challenges so that the Vincentian charism can renew itself and be effective in the coming years. I encourage you to move forward although there will be difficult times ahead. I encourage you to open your hearts, as in this Year of the Mercy of God, we are invited to open our hearts and our doors in order to do our part in the evangelization and service of our lords and masters, the poor, in Italy.

Translated: Derek Swanson, C.M.

VMY Moderators

Rome, 29 January 2016

*To all the Visitors of the Congregation of the Mission
and all the Visitatrixes of the Daughters of Charity*

Dear Sisters and confreres,

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

This is my annual letter of encouragement regarding the promotion of our very own youth association, the Vincentian Marian Youth.

In our most recent International Council Meeting, held in Madrid from 7-10 January, among the things discussed was a petition on the part of the new International Council that the Superior General encourage all Visitatrixes, Visitors, and Moderators of the Vincentian Marian Youth to continue to see this apostolate as an essential way of helping to spread the charism among young people. It is not only a way of promoting vocations to any of the various branches, but particularly to the Congregation of the Mission or to the Daughters of Charity. That is certainly a very real aspect, because there are many vocations both in the Congregation and the Daughters that have come from the development, accompaniment, and promotion of this Association. It is also very near and dear to both the Congregation and the Daughters of Charity as a response to a very concrete petition that Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal made to Saint Catherine Labouré.

One of our particular concerns for the Vincentian Marian Youth is an aspect that seems to be common among a number of the National Councils; that is, a lack of stability in the different leadership roles of the young people on these councils. What I mean is that, first of all, it is at times difficult for young people to assume the responsibility of leadership within the Association. Why? We are not quite sure. Perhaps it is out of fear; or because they might be criticized for the way they lead and, therefore, due to peer pressure they are not willing to

assume these responsibilities, or it might be that they are unwilling to make a commitment for any length of time. This indicates that they are really part of the society in which we live, where commitments of great length are not held in much regard. We wonder if the Visitors, Visitatrixes, and Moderators can help to encourage young people to overcome this weakness in coming to understand the importance of leadership and to assume such roles as a way of growing, broadening their own perspectives, widening their vision of the world, and living more faithfully the witness of the faith that we know exists among them.

Secondly, the other difficulty that we have experienced is that, once they assume roles of leadership, it is not long-lived and they begin to resign and walk away from the responsibility that they have. Again, there is a need for greater accompaniment, not only on the part of the Moderators, whom we ask to walk with these young people in their growth in faith and their growth in the role of leadership, but also on that of the Visitors and Visitatrixes, who should not see themselves as separated from this Association, but very much a part of it and an inspiration for the Association.

I, as Superior General, have taken very seriously my role as the Director General over these last 12 years. I have not found it a burden, but an opportunity for me to be able to pass on the charisma that I love deeply and see how well it is received by young people today. My experience is that all they need is a bit of encouragement. Unfortunately, we are not doing it as well as I think we are able to do it. Oftentimes, Visitatrixes and Visitors name Moderators without taking into consideration the ability of the Moderator to be able to accompany young people. Then, after a year or two, the confrere or the Daughter of Charity receives a new assignment and is immediately pulled out from the responsibility of being the Moderator because the location of the new apostolate makes accompaniment impossible.

Therefore, I ask you not to see this as a secondary assignment, but take seriously the naming of Moderators both from the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity. At the same time, encourage those people, who wish to remain a part of the Association, but who are now young adults or persons of a maturity level who can no longer consider themselves to be young. They may want to accompany, so we should encourage them to carry out the role of moderators. They need the encouragement of both the confrere and Daughter Moderators, as well as that of the Visitatrixes and Visitors.

I ask the Visitatrixes and Visitors to encourage the Moderators to maintain open dialog and communication with the young people and with the international organization of the Vincentian Marian Youth. Although we may know that the association is functioning in a particular place and often better than we are able to discover by means of communication, one of our greatest difficulties is just that: communication. Sometimes the young people do not have the access that the confrere or the Daughter might have to means of communication. Encourage the Moderators to maintain contact with the International Secretariat and also with the International Council member responsible for a particular country. We want to help strengthen those ties between this branch of the Vincentian Family, who are our young people to whom we are called to pass on the charism, and the Daughters of Charity and the Congregation of the Mission.

Finally, I again encourage you, as I previously mentioned, to give a bit more stability to the accompaniment of young people. They do appreciate our accompaniment and they do look up to us for spiritual guidance. I ask that we take that seriously, not only to help the charism grow among young people, not only that the poor might be better served, but also so that we might contribute to building a Church, which is one of participation and communion among all peoples and especially the future leaders of our societies, which we find in the young people who participate in the Association. Thank you.

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General

Solemnity of Saint Louise de Marillac

Rome, 3 February 2016

*To all the Priests and Brothers
of the Congregation of the Mission*

Dear Confreres,

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

Some time ago, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments asked us to review the Vincentian Liturgical Calendar according to the new norms. The Procurator General, Father Shijo Kanjirathamkunnel, undertook this task and presented the list to the said Congregation. It was then requested that we consider changing the feast of Saint Louise de Marillac, because it always falls during Lent and it is preferable not to celebrate solemnities during that particular liturgical season.

Together with the Superioress General, Sister Kathleen Appler, and her Council, I and my Council searched for an appropriate date. We agreed on 9 May, the anniversary of Saint Louise's beatification, because the anniversary of her canonization also falls during Lent. On 14 December 2015, Father Shijo presented the request for a change of date to the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments which issued a decree, dated 4 January 2016, consenting to our request. The celebration of Saint Louise's feast remains a solemnity and, effective immediately, will be celebrated each year on 9 May.

In addition, we have requested that her feast be inserted into the Church's universal calendar. We do not yet have a response to that request.

As we close this Year of Consecrated Life and continue in the Jubilee Year of Mercy, may we each draw strength from the many graces these special times afford us. God bless.

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General

Letter Lent 2016

Rome, Lent 2016

My dear Brothers and Sisters, Members of the Vincentian Family:

Lent: a time for Fasting

A Story: During a visit to Venezuela where I met with members of the various branches of the Vincentian Family, people spoke about the country's social and economic crisis and its impact on everyday life. People have to wait in long lines to buy basic foodstuffs such as bread, milk, rice, beans, etc.; people have to wait in long lines to purchase soap, toothpaste, paper products; people have to wait in long lines to obtain medicine and medical supplies; people have to wait in long lines at bus stations because of reduced schedules resulting from fewer spare parts and no new tires for those vehicles used in public transportation; people have to wait in long lines in order to obtain travel visas and



again they have to wait in even longer lines at airports. Waiting for hours, however, provides no guarantee that one will obtain the desired goods and provides no guarantee that one will not hear those dreaded words: *we have run out of bread* (or whatever one is looking for). That declaration means that one will have to wait until the following week since one can only become part of “long line” when the last number of one’s personal identity card corresponds to a specific day of the

week. At the same time, however, people have spoken about positive effects of this crisis, pointing out the fact that the bonds of solidarity have been strengthened. One of our confreres stated that the present situation has led them to adopt a simpler lifestyle and has brought the community closer to the reality of the poor. This social, economic, and political situation and its negative and positive elements can be viewed as a movement from the cross (the crisis) to the resurrection (solidarity and greater identification with the situation of those who are poor).



A Jesus Story: And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us (John 1:14). God, all loving, all merciful, all compassionate, never abandoned humankind. 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). Jesus mingled among the people who formed the long lines of outcasts, waiting and hoping to participate as active members of society. Jesus fed the multitudes and not only was no one turned away but baskets and baskets of leftovers were gathered up (Mark 6:34-44). Jesus extended unconditional forgiveness to

sinners, seventy times seven (Matthew 18:22) and exhorted his followers to be as compassionate toward their brothers and sisters as God was compassionate toward them (Luke 6:36). As a result of the Incarnation, Jesus today can be found in all those long lines that are found in countless cities throughout the world, long lines of men and women who cry out every hour of every day, demanding to be included as equal members of society.

A New Story:

Yes, Lent is a time for fasting, but during this Year of Mercy our fasting must take on a new form, one that leads to personal and

community conversion. Our fast should mean that we can never be *accused of passivity, indulgence or culpable complicity regarding the intolerable situations of injustice and the political regimes which prolong them* (*Evangelii Gaudium*, #194). Our fasting must penetrate our very being, must pain us to the very depths so that we can hear and understand anew the cries of our brothers and sisters. Then, as we listen to those cries, let us run to serve them *as if we were running to a fire*¹. Let us remember, however, that as we establish relationships with those on the peripheries, *we have to sympathize with them in order to suffer with them ... we have to ... make them [our hearts] sensitive to the sufferings and the miseries of our neighbor, and ask God to give us the true spirit of mercy, which is the characteristic spirit of God* (CCD XI: 308). May our fast during this Lenten season give us, members of the Vincentian Family, a new heart, a heart of flesh, a heart that enables us to establish ever stronger bonds with *our lords and masters*, with the countless men and women who are forgotten and abandoned throughout the world. May our Lenten fast reflect that same movement that our brothers and sisters in Venezuela experience, a movement from the cross (our own situation of crisis) to the resurrection (solidarity and greater identification with the situation of those who are poor).

Lent: a time for Prayer

A Story: Last month, on the Feast of the Epiphany, I traveled to Notre Dame de Prime-Combe, a shrine that is administered by the confreres from the Province of Toulouse and by a well-prepared lay pastoral team. At one time as many as 50,000 people would gather together to celebrate the feast. Today, perhaps 300 people come to commemorate the Feast of Our Lady, but each Sunday, whenever possible, a confrere celebrates the Eucharist there. I was deeply impressed by the simple faith of the some 50 members of the congregation who had gathered there to celebrate the Eucharist. They were, all of them, 60 years of age or older (no young people were present). Sharing life with this community of faith is a group of Benedictine monks who, since the 1990s, have lived in one of the

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.

buildings on the grounds of our property. This group of monks, however, is a very special community. Each member lives with some handicap. Yet, these men lead their lives in a joyful and simple manner and provide the surrounding community with a powerful example of the manner in which work and prayer can be interwoven with one another.

A Jesus Story: Jesus often withdrew from the crowds and from his disciples in order to spend some time in prayer. He told his followers: *pray for those who persecute you* (Matthew 5:44) and he himself prayed that *they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you* (John 17:21). We are all familiar with the account of Jesus' anguished prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-42). At the same time Jesus extolled the humble prayer of the tax collector: *O God, be merciful to me a sinner* and stated that it was the tax collector who went home justified because *those who humble themselves will be exalted* (Luke 18:9-14). Jesus also praised the generous offering of the poor widow who went up to Jerusalem to pray (Mark 12:43-44). Before he departed this world, Jesus left his followers the legacy of a prayer that combines two great desires centered on God, with three cries of petition centered



Our Lady of Prime-Combe

on the urgent basic needs of humanity. Jesus tells the Father the two desires of his heart: *hallowed be your name and your kingdom come*. That is followed by the three cries of petition: *give us bread, forgive our debts, and do not bring us to the time of trial*². As a result of the Incarnation, God understands our needs, understands that we are broken and wounded, and in the person of Jesus all those realities are raised up to the Father!

A New Story: Yes, Lent is a time for prayer, and our prayer, like our fasting, must also take on a new form during this Year of

² José Antonio Pagola, *Jesus: An Historical Approximation*, translated: Margaret Wilde, Convivium Press, Miami, 2014, p. 313-316.

Mercy, one that leads to personal community conversion. *Without prolonged moments of adoration, of prayerful encounter with the word, of sincere conversation with the Lord, our work easily becomes meaningless; we lose energy as a result of weariness and difficulties, and our fervour dies out. The Church urgently needs the deep breath of prayer (Evangelii Gaudium, #262).* Our prayer and fasting give meaning to our ministry/service and our ministry/service gives meaning to our prayer and fasting. My hope is that during these 40 days of Lent we might take time not only to listen to the cries of the poor, not only to serve and minister on behalf of the poor, but to pray **with** the poor. Furthermore, are not all of us like the members of the Benedictine community at Notre Dame de Prime-Combe, that is, are we not in some way broken and in need of healing, in need of the prayers of others? Therefore, like the Benedictine monks, our “handicaps” should not prevent us from contributing to the building up of our community, the association, the Congregation.

Finally, what would it be like to ask people, as Pope Francis continually does, *please pray for me*? What would it be like to invite the poor into our homes to share with them a time of prayer? I would encourage you to do this and then during the Easter Season we could share with one another our experience of sharing prayer in such a manner with our *lords and masters*.

May our prayer and fasting enable us to die with Christ during this Lenten Season of 2016 so that we might rise with Christ on Easter Sunday and sing our song of Alleluia.

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General

Letter AMM

Rome, 8 March 2016

*To the Visitors of the Congregation of the Mission
and the Visitatrixes of the Daughters of Charity*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

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

I write to you as the Director General of the Association of the Miraculous Medal. Recently, we had our International Council Meeting, held in Philadelphia and hosted by the Sub-Director General, Father Carl Pieber. First of all, I was requested by the Council to send a note to the Visitors and Visitatrixes to encourage them to name moderators, where the Association exists, who will accompany the members of the Association in helping to spread devotion to Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal.

Secondly, the National Directors, normally members of the Congregation of the Mission, are asked, according to the Statutes of the International Association of the Miraculous Medal, to send annual reports to the Director General, with a copy to the Sub-Director General. For the most part, the practice has been to send those to the Sub-Director General, but with the knowledge of the Director General.

Thirdly, there are a number of Associations throughout the world, which have yet to have their Statutes approved. In light of the 2009 General Assembly, at which we finalized the Statutes of the Association and which then were approved by the Vatican, it is our hope that, where the Association exists, there be Statutes approved by the Director General and his Council. As of 2015, in reviewing our reports, we have not received any Statutes for approval.

Finally, we note in our Directory, through the communication that we have, which is often very poor, but which we hope to be able to

improve in various ways, that there are a number of member Associations that do not have lay presidents. So we ask that this be encouraged. If there are presidents in the different countries, please inform the Director General and his Council. If there are any new presidents, it would be well to inform us as to when they took office. There is no need to have the role of president confirmed. It is simply to inform us, especially the Sub-Director General. The latter can be contacted by email: cpieber@gmail.com.

Thank you for your assistance in this matter. God bless!

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General

Homily, the New Province of France

25 January 2016

Christian Mauvais, C.M.
Visitor of France

Dear confreres, dear friends of the Vincentian Family, dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Today is a special day for our province of France, because the province is coming into being after a long journey, which has not always been easy, but even at times painful. There were struggles and sufferings, but this is what happens in every birth! We are always happy with a new-born called to grow. This day should thus be a time of thanksgiving amid complete confidence!

Allow me to thank the Visitors who have worked to give life to the two provinces as they have given themselves to them, especially to the two most recent ones, Elie and Jean-Yves. Thank you for the steps you have taken, and for what you have done interprovincially. You often had to adapt yourselves to understand and to design the way forward to arrive at what we are living today. These careful efforts have allowed us to approach one another and finally to unite.

It is relatively easy to impart a unique look to the new reality by bringing together the two provinces of France, as we have done at the beginning of Mass. This event symbolizes what we want to undertake together these next months. I have no doubt that tomorrow, the reality will be more difficult since it has to be concretized in persons and situations. This work of building will require time for the province to acquire its own look focused on the missionary plan to which we have given ourselves.

This is everyone's work, the work of everyone as a confrere. No one should feel excluded or left out of this event. We are all concerned about who we are, our strengths and our weaknesses, our lived experience, and our plans insofar as they form part of the common missionary plan. We are strong in our will to move ahead, to devote

ourselves so that the province will hand on our charism in the best possible way.

This is a work that we will accomplish with others, especially with the members of the Vincentian Family in all their diversity (some of them have joined us today). It means simply working together on one or two local projects. On this concrete level we will come to know each other and want to advance even more. Being with others is richer when we work together and when the poor are the first to benefit from our labors.

This is a work to be done with the presence of our brothers who come from distinct cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This fills out our presence in other areas of the world, some of which have a distinct religious reality (Iran, Canada, Algeria, Turkey, Greece). Here, we have the good fortune to receive priests who come to study and to be engaged temporarily in pastoral ministry (Cameroon, which will soon become a vice-province, Vietnam, Colombia, Indonesia, Poland, Madagascar, to cite just some). The international and intercultural mission is a plus for the mission. **We should not deprive ourselves of this presence!**

To be committed by this desire to move ahead is already a victory and a source of joy and confidence. Joy should reside in us, the joy of being together as we work on the same project in the service of the poor, in the Church. (“Those visiting the tomb on Easter morning are not the disciples of the Risen Christ,” a certain François once said.) I invite you therefore to take a look at this provincial reality, to love it, to support it, and to devote yourselves to maintaining and enhancing its human and apostolic beauty, to make our charism visible, and to be appealing to others. The more we go to the poor, the more appealing we will be. **We will not disfigure ourselves by being close to the poor.**

To accomplish this, I would like to offer you two perspectives, two experiences: Mary, and Paul, whose conversion we celebrate today, our Foundation Day.

After some hesitation and questions, when I said yes to the request that had been made to me, I placed my three-year term as Visitor under the patronage of Mary, the most beautiful of the disciples that we have. I asked her to give me the spirit of listening, of availability, and of humility. She was the first to set out on the road to visit Elizabeth and to bring the Christ. In our case, to visit means going out,

meeting, dialoguing, and listening under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We have to move out to be fruitful.

It seems to me that Mary is the one who rightly invites us to move from merely being efficient to being fruitful. She is the one who recalls for us that the Word of God alone is efficient, and that we are invited to be fruitful and to allow every person to do the same. My responsibility asks me to visit the confreres, and I will be happy to do so:

- To understand and welcome them in the context of this fruitfulness of the apostolate lived in community, in closeness with the persons to whom they are sent;
- To contemplate and rejoice together over what has been accomplished in our lives, in the lives of the poor, and to rejoice at being in service of the life coming to birth in every person;
- To discern through dialogue the realities and priorities where we have to be engaged as Vincentians.

The province will only be enriched through the fruitfulness of each one in the measure that we reach out. **We should not deprive ourselves of these fraternal moments.**

Paul's experience as he had his life-changing meeting with Christ also has something to tell us. This convinced person, who gave himself completely to his mission in faithfulness to the Law, was nonetheless shaken and thrown to the ground. This unexpected meeting made him change his outlook and orientation.

Christ knows how to call us in unexpected ways in our own mission. He helps us to see him in those who have not always been sufficiently accounted for by the Church and society. We should listen to this voice: "Why are you persecuting me?" Why do not join me in the poor to be Good News for them?

When we stay fixed in our ways of acting, in our certitudes, Christ invites us to live out the abandonment of our security, to let go, to not be stuck in our own apostolic plans, to review our lifestyle. Humility allows us to be readjusted to Christ, to listen again to his Word. In his blindness, Paul learned to look deep within himself, to review the direction of his life, to let himself be led or guided by others, to learn confidence, to rely on the laity, to be opened to a world of networking and other structures. Our projects will be fruitful if they are discerned with others, worked out and reflected on in community. When another

examines and listens, we gain clarity. Humility and simplicity are the area where the Holy Spirit is ready to work on us, to move us, to speak to us, and to have us take risky new steps.

In this abandonment, our resistance falls. In this humility, we are lifted up. In letting go, we are strengthened. In this opening to the Spirit, new and unimagined roads can open before us, revive us, and prepare us. Saint Vincent's own experience is foundational for us.

We will certainly have to come down to earth to adjust ourselves to the missionary plan voted in the recent Provincial Assemblies. Nothing is completely clear yet as to how to move ahead, but let us have confidence and agree to be moved and shaken. We have everything to gain.

- In finding the fundamental virtues as a base for living out the mission, we will become fruitful.
- In turning back to the poor, all of us will have a source of renewal.
- In redeploying our collaboration, we will open ourselves and will grow.

Let us keep alive this desire to live as Vincentians, to translate our charism, and inspire others to follow us. These are the wishes that I have drawn up for us all as we begin.

Translated: John E. Rybolt, C.M.

A Word of Gratitude (Celebration of the Eucharist on the occasion of the Erection of the new Province of France)

Paris, 25 January 2016

by: Francisco Javier Álvarez, C.M.

My dear brothers, allow me to express a word of gratitude to the Lord for this event, which marks the birth of the new Province of France, which is at one and the same time a point of departure and a point of arrival, just like the feast that we are celebrating today. The road to Damascus divided in two the life of the Apostle Paul: on the one hand, Paul left behind his former life and, at the same time, began a new life. The document, *Vita Consecrata*, enlightens the event that we are celebrating. Pope John Paul II stated: *You have not only a glorious history to remember and to recount, but also a great history still to be accomplished! Look to the future, where the Spirit is sending you in order to do even greater things* (John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, # 110).

We give thanks to God for the past history of these two Provinces, the Province of Paris and the Province of Toulouse; we give thanks for the many Missionaries who dedicated their life to service on behalf of the poor and those excluded from participation in the society of France; we give thanks for the many Missionaries who served in lands beyond the French borders. If we could see in one single moment all the good that was accomplished by the members of these two Provinces, the great good that was accomplished throughout the many years of their history, we could not help but stand in awe before all those accomplishments. It is the gift of faith that assures us that God has accompanied the confreres of these two Provinces and has nourished the life of so many Missionaries.

But we cannot stand here and continue to look at the past. Our eyes ought to focus on the future, as Pope John Paul II reminds us, our eyes ought to focus on what lies ahead. We, like our predecessors, are called to continue our history, to evangelize and to minister on behalf of the poorer members of society, and we are called to do this in light of the difficulties and problems that are proper to this era. Hopefully no

Missionary is lacking the courage that Saint Vincent had, courage that enabled him to minister and to evangelize during the 17th century.

In the name of the Superior General and in the name of the whole Congregation, I congratulate you and ask God to accompany you as you journey along this new path that today is initiated by the Congregation in France.

Translated: Charles T. Plock, C.M.

Privileges of the Congregation of the Mission

Text and Commentary

Shijo Kanjirathamkunnel, C.M.

Introduction

The privileges are the patrimony of the Congregation of the Mission. From the various sources available today, it is possible to select five important works that have been accessible to us since the origin of the Congregation.¹ There are also many other sources,² in the form of interpretations and commentaries, that have been published individually and are now available in various publications of the Congregation of the Mission.

Nevertheless, there are confreres who find it difficult to ascertain the prominent and relevant privileges, because, with the promulgation of the new code of Canon Law (1983), some of the privileges have become universal law. Confreres also have found it challenging to explain them to the local ordinaries in order to make use of the privileges. At times, it is also difficult to prove the existence of the privileges to the members of the Congregation of the Mission. There are three main objectives for which Very Rev. G. Gregory Gay, C.M.,

¹ The privileges of the Congregation of the Mission were given to us, as it was the custom, through some communication published in the *Acta Apostolica*. Usually the privileges were granted to various Orders and Congregations and were then catalogued in the code of 1917. The main published collections of the Privileges of the Congregation of the Mission are: *Manuale facultatum, privilegiorum e indulgentiarum pro sodalibus presbyteris trium Congregationum sanctarum Missionum, que Neapoli sunt erectae*. Neapoli, 1813; *De privilegiis et indulgentiis Congregationi Missionis auctoritate apostolica concessis et confirmatis*. Romae, 1815 ; *De privilegiis et indulgentiis Congregationi Missionis auctoritate apostolica concessis et confirmatis*. Mexici, 1860 ; *Summarium privilegiorum et indulgentiarum Congregationis Missionis concessorum ad confirmatorum*. Parisiis, 1863; *Collectio privilegiorum et indulgentiarum quae S. Sedes Congregationi Missionis benigne concessit*. Parisiis, 1990.

² Important among them are, *Privilegios e Indulgencias de la Congregación de la Misión* by Fernández Martínez, C.M., Madrid, 1947; *Commentarium privilegiorum et indulgentiarum Congregationis Missionis* by Jacinto Fernández, C.M., Matriti, 1962; "Privilegios antiguos y Derecho nuevo" by Miguel Pérez Flores, C.M., published in *Anales* 1991.

Superior General, and the General Council proposed this assignment: they are the patrimony of the Congregation, to respond to the requests and doubts of some of the confreres, and precision about the privileges can help us in our ministry.

After the promulgation of the 1983 Code, Father Miguel Pérez Flores, C.M., made an extensive study of the privileges. That study, which was published in *Anales*³ and *Vincentiana*⁴ was never made available to many confreres in the non-Spanish-speaking provinces. Here we have attempted to select the relevant privileges that are still in force and that may be helpful to the members of the Congregation of the Mission as they engage in various ministries. This does not mean that the other privileges, which were elucidated in the earlier publications, are abrogated.

Understanding Privileges

With the publication of the 1917 Code, there was a change in the granting of privileges to religious institutes. In that Code, Canon 613 §1, said, “Every religious (institute) enjoys only those privileges that are contained in this Code, or that have been directly granted to it by the Apostolic See, exclusive of any communication in the future”.

The present code of Canon Law⁵ explains privileges in Canons 76-94. Canon 76 §1 states: *A privilege is a favor given through a particular act to the benefit of certain physical or juridic persons; it can be granted by the legislator as well as by an executive authority to whom the legislator has granted this power.*

Canon 76 §2: *Centenary or immemorial possession induces the presumption that a privilege has been granted.* There are two presumptions here. First, the actual possession of privileges has been in existence for more than hundred years. This presumption is supported by Canon 78 §1: *A privilege is presumed to be perpetual, unless the contrary is proved.* Centenary possession (i.e. possession for 100 years or more) can be proved by documentation, e.g., our first written document on privileges can be traced back to 1813.⁶ Therefore,

³ *Anales*, 1991.

⁴ *Vincentiana*, 1992.

⁵ Hereafter when I refer to the *Code of Canon Law*, it is the Code of 1983. When there is a reference to the Code of 1917, specific mention will be made of that fact.

⁶ *Manuale facultatum, privilegiorum et indulgentiarum pro sodalibus presbyteris trium Congregationum sactum Missionum, quae Neapoli sunt erectae.* Neapoli, 1813. This is the oldest document on the privileges of the Congregation of the Mission I was able to find. I am not sure if any printed document is available before 1813.

according to this Canon we can affirm that we, the Congregation of the Mission, are in possession of certain privileges. The second presumption rests on the memory of persons, who may not be able to recall all the details surrounding the granting of a privilege, but know that such a privilege was granted. In both of the above-mentioned situations, such a privilege is law. The possessor of the privilege is not obliged to defend the exercise of the same unless challenged to do so.⁷

I. Privileges concerning the Congregation of the Mission in general

1. The Superior General can prove the existence of the privileges of the Congregation of the Mission by signing and sealing the copies or compilations of the same. The signed and sealed copies or compilations by the Superior General have the same validity as that of the original documents.

This privilege provides us with a way to prove the legitimacy of the existence of a particular privilege. A concrete proof for the existence of the privilege is the Papal Bull *Salvatoris Nostri* by Pope Urban VIII through which the Congregation was approved on 12 January 1633.⁸ The Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission can prove the existence of a privilege by his signature and personal seal on a copy or a compilation of privileges. This has the same validity as an original text.⁹ The use of these privileges should be guided by pastoral necessity. In this same regard great prudence is to be used so that ecclesiastical law and the norms of the episcopal conference of the country are respected. Through means of extension not only do the incorporated members of the Congregation of the Mission enjoy these privileges, but also the admitted members.¹⁰ This is clearly stated in our Constitution, article 59 §1.

⁷ James A. Coriden and others, *The Code of Canon Law – A Text and Commentary* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 62.

⁸ Other important Papal documents include, *Ex commissa nobis* of Alexander VII, *Exponi Nobis* of Benedict XIII, and *Aequa Apostolicae* of Benedict XIV.

⁹ Miguel Pérez Flores, “Privilegios antiguos y Derecho nuevo,” *Anales* 99, no 4 (Octubre – Diciembre 1988): 14.

¹⁰ *Privilegiis, exemptionibus et indulgentiis Congregationis Missionis concessis vel concedendis gaudent non solum novitii, sed etiam convictores, aliique nobiscum nunc et in futurum conviventes diu noctuque.*

2. Major Superiors of the Congregation of the Mission can give certificates of affiliation to the benefactors of the Congregation. In virtue of this relationship, they participate in the suffrages, indulgences, prayers, and good works of the entire Congregation or of the respective Province.

Today we have the practice of granting a certificate of affiliation to the Congregation to those persons who collaborate in some notable way with our mission. Affiliates can be nominated by a Visitor or Vice Visitor to the Superior General according to the polices of the province or vice province.¹¹

3. The Superior General and the Visitors can admit students, even priests, as candidates to the Congregation of the Mission without the permission of the Bishop, even against his judgment.

In the Code of 1917 (Canon 542, 2^o), admitting a cleric to the novitiate without consulting the local ordinary was an impediment to licit admission. In the 1983 Code (Canon 644), failure to consult the local ordinary does not invalidate the admission of the cleric. It is strongly recommended that superiors consult the local ordinary; nevertheless, once they have done so, they are free to admit the cleric. In practice, it is difficult to imagine a cleric leaving the diocese without informing his bishop and just as difficult to imagine a major superior admitting a cleric without consulting that individual's bishop. Such possibility, however, cannot be ruled out. This privilege underscores the law that gives persons the right to choose the place and institution where they will live out their human and Christian vocation.¹²

4. Superiors of the Congregation of the Mission can dispense their members from common ecclesiastical laws, the same as a Bishop can dispense his priests and the laity.

A dispensation is the relaxation of an ecclesiastical law in a particular situation (Canon 85). This privilege states that the superior can dispense his subjects in the same way as a diocesan bishop. The following points, however, must be kept in mind. One must use prudent judgment, that is, there must be some spiritual benefit to be derived as a result of the dispensation.¹³ Dispensation can be given

¹¹ The granting of this affiliation is no longer in the competency of the provincials or vice provincials. Our Statutes give this authority solely to the Superior General (n. 51, 13^o).

¹² Miguel Pérez Flores, 17.

only for a just and reasonable cause taking into account the circumstances of the case and the importance of the law from which the dispensation is given. Otherwise, it can be unlawful and invalid (Canon 90).

5. Bishops can impose ecclesiastical penalties on the members of the Congregation of the Mission for those cases in which they have jurisdiction. However, they cannot punish them with censures.

Canon 1320 establishes that *the local ordinary can coerce religious with penalties in all those matters in which they are subject to him*. Here there is no explicit mention of the members of Societies of Apostolic Life. Canon 738 §2, however, specifies, *They (the members of the Society of Apostolic Life) are also subject to the diocesan bishop in those matters which regard public worship, the care of souls, and other works of the apostolate, with attention to cann. 679–683*. In light of this, the ordinary can impose all available penalties. However, because of this privilege, a local ordinary cannot impose on the members of the Congregation of the Mission censures such as, excommunication, suspension, and interdict.¹⁴

6. Those who preside over the General Assembly or the Provincial Assembly can dispense the elected delegates to the Assembly.

Today such a situation may not happen as frequently as it did in the past, nevertheless, we cannot ignore this and view it as an impossibility.

II. Privileges regarding the houses and churches of the Congregation of the Mission

7. The Congregation of the Mission has the privilege of preventing the construction of another religious house or a church or an oratory that is not at least 699 meters distant from the house of the Congregation.

¹³ This privilege gives Superiors of the Congregation the same authority as the local ordinary to dispense from ecclesiastical laws. This authority is stated in Canon 87 §1: *A diocesan bishop, whenever he judges that it contributes to their spiritual good, is able to dispense the faithful from universal and particular disciplinary laws issued for his territory or his subjects by the supreme authority of the Church. He is not able to dispense, however, from procedural or penal laws, nor from those whose dispensation is especially reserved to the Apostolic See or some other authority.*

¹⁴ Miguel Pérez Flores, 22.

The context in which this privilege was granted was past rivalries among ecclesial communities. Canon 610 §1 states that *the erection of houses takes place with consideration for their advantage to the Church and the institute and with suitable safeguards for those things which are required to carry out properly the religious life of the members according to the proper purposes and spirit of the institute*. Today the significance of such a privilege may seem trivial; however, in cases where this Canon is not observed we have the right to approach the competent authority.

8. The Congregation of the Mission can change the location of a house within the same city without the permission of the Local Ordinary.

Canon 733 of the *Code* distinguishes between a house and a community of a Society of Apostolic Life. Nevertheless, the present *Code* does not give any specific information about the transfer of houses. This privilege is in force, but in practice, it is difficult to imagine someone implementing such a change without informing the local ordinary.

III. Privileges concerning the Ministers of the Word

9. The privileges given for the duration of the popular missions can also be used when the priests of the Congregation of the Mission conduct spiritual retreats, novenas, or any other continuous preaching even outside of the missions for those staying in our houses.

The privilege, for example, to celebrate Masses for the dead during the time of a popular mission can also be used at other times during one's ministry. Definitely, there must be a good pastoral reason to use these privileges and the spiritual exercise should be at least three days.

10. Mission Directors can extend to the secular clergy who collaborate in the mission the same privileges regarding the sacrament of penance and the Liturgy of the Hours. This privilege is in force only during the time of the mission.

When diocesan priests collaborate in popular missions that are organized by the members of the Congregation of the Mission, the director can extend to the diocesan clergy the same privileges that they have. These privileges, however, are limited to praying the Liturgy of

the Hours and confessions and are in force only during the time of the mission.

11. **The priests of the Congregation of the Mission, during a mission or during another ministry, can enroll the faithful in all the associations and confraternities approved by the Holy See.**

When using this privilege the Statutes of each Association are to be respected. The enrollment of parishioners should be done only after consulting the pastor about this process especially if this will involve the establishment of an association in that parish.

IV. Privileges Concerning the Eucharist

12. **On Holy Thursday Mass can be celebrated in our churches and oratories, different from the solemn mass and the liturgical offices, for the benefit of the sick.**

The Eucharist can be celebrated on any day and at any hour, except those, which are excluded by liturgical law (Canon 931).

13. **The priests of the Congregation of the Mission have no obligation to assist at the Chrism Mass that Bishops celebrate in the Cathedral unless there are an insufficient number of ministers and diocesan clergy.**

The Chrism Mass is a symbol of communion between the bishop and the clergy. Therefore, all the priests ministering in the diocese, should, as much as possible, concelebrate with the bishop on that day. The priests of the Congregation of the Mission are not obliged to participate in the Chrism Mass. However, it is highly recommended that they participate in the Chrism Mass especially if they are ministering in the diocese.

14. **Under two conditions the commitment of the Congregation of the Mission to celebrate perpetual Mass intentions does not extend beyond 50 years. First, if those asking for such Mass intentions know and agree to it. Secondly, after 50 years, those for whom such Masses were offered automatically become participants in the merits and the sacrifices of the members of the Congregation of the Mission, which are offered for the benefactors in general.**

When someone entrusts a perpetual foundation for Masses to the Congregation of the Mission, the obligation to celebrate the Masses

ends after 50 years. The donors must be informed of this restriction or we can be accused of deceit and even theft. Our Statutes prohibit accepting obligations in perpetuity (107 §2). After 50 years, the benefactors continue to enjoy the spiritual goods of the Congregation. Statute 26 §2 states: *Every month each member, according to his status, should offer Mass for the living and dead of the entire Vincentian Family as well as for parents, relatives, and benefactors, adding a special intention for the preservation of the original spirit of the Congregation.*

15. **The Local Ordinary cannot demand of the Parish Priests of the Congregation of the Mission to present the book in which the intention and the offering of the Masses is recorded of the parishes entrusted to the Congregation of the Mission.**

According to Canon 957, it is the right and duty of the local ordinary to see that Mass obligations are fulfilled in the cases of secular clergy and the superior in the case of the churches of Religious Institutes or Societies of Apostolic Life. The local ordinary is obliged to inspect the book, which records the Mass offerings every year (Canon 958 §2). This privilege exempts the parish priests of the parishes entrusted to the Congregation of the Mission of presenting the book, in which Mass intentions are recorded, to the bishop.

16. **The Blessed Sacrament can be reserved in each chapel of the same house if there exist groups who can be considered members of different communities.**

Canon 934 §1, 1° states: *The Most Holy Eucharist must be reserved in the cathedral church or its equivalent, in every parish church, and in a church or oratory connected to the house of a religious institute or society of apostolic life.*

In the house of a religious institute or some other pious house, the Most Holy Eucharist is to be reserved only in the church or principal oratory attached to the house. For a just cause, however, the ordinary can also permit it to be reserved in another oratory of the same house (Canon 936).

Therefore, this privilege allows the Eucharist to be reserved in different chapels or oratories of the same house of the Congregation of the Mission without the permission of the bishop. The existence of different groups in the same community is a just reason to reserve the Eucharist and thus facilitate the veneration of the Blessed Sacrament for each group.

V. Privileges Concerning the Sacrament of Penance

17. The priests of the Congregation of the Mission, who have faculties to hear confessions, can absolve censures reserved to the Ordinary by particular law, but only in the internal forum and in the context of sacramental confession which takes place during missions, spiritual retreats, and days of recollection, etc., that occur inside or outside our houses.

It is important to understand the meaning of censures that are reserved by particular law. Canon 1314¹⁵ defines the difference between *ferendae sententiae* and *latae sententiae*.¹⁶

18. The priests of the Congregation of the Mission cannot only commute private vows but also can dispense from them for a just cause, except those reserved to the Holy See, provided that such dispensation does not injure the acquired rights of others.¹⁷

The vows of Secular Institutes or of Societies of Apostolic Life or other ecclesial communities that are governed by their respective constitutions (even when those vows are not public), cannot be considered as private vows (Canon 1192 §1).

Canon 1196 states: *In addition to the Roman Pontiff, the following can dispense from private vows for a just cause provided that a dispensation does not injure a right acquired by others:*

1° *the local ordinary and the pastor with regard to all their subjects and even travelers;*

2° *the superior of a religious institute or society of apostolic life if it is clerical and of pontifical right with regard to members, novices, and persons who live day and night in a house of the institute or society;*

¹⁵ “A penalty is for the most part *ferendae sententiae*, that is, not binding upon the offender until it has been imposed. It is, however, *latae sententiae*, so that it is incurred automatically upon the commission of an offence, if the law or precept expressly lays this down (1314).

¹⁶ The School of Navarre University makes a distinction between *ferendae sententiae a iure* and *ab homine*. *A iure* is established by penal norms and as such can be *latae* or *ferendae sententiae* whereas, *ab homine* is imposed by a decree of some governing body or by a judicial sentence that is handed down by an ecclesiastical court. The general principle governing *latae sententiae* is that there is some obligation that must be fulfilled. It has also been necessary, in exceptional cases, to give remission of the penalty in the internal forum. This privilege refers to censure reserved by particular law *ab homine*.

¹⁷ This privilege of commuting and dispensing vows can be used outside the confessional but it is recommended that it be within the context of sacramental confession. When it is within the context of confession, it presupposes that the one who commutes or dispenses has the faculty to hear confessions.

3° those to whom the Apostolic See or the local ordinary has delegated the power of dispensing.

Canon 1197 states: *The person who makes a private vow can commute the work promised by the vow into a better or equal good; however, one who has the power of dispensing according to the norm of can. 1196 can commute it into a lesser good.*

VI. Privileges Concerning the Sacrament of Orders

19. The Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission can dispense his subjects from the interstices (intervals) to be observed in the reception of orders.

Canons 1031, 1032 §2, and 1035 refer to requirements such as age, time between diaconate and priesthood and philosophical and theological studies. The required age for priesthood is 25 years and 23 years for the transitional diaconate. This requirement emphasizes the importance of psychological maturity that is referred to in Canon 1029. The period mentioned between diaconate and priesthood is six months and this is based on the principle that formation is not to be rushed, but rather sufficient opportunity should be given to the candidates to exercise orders before they are promoted to a higher order. A candidate for the priesthood must complete five years of philosophy/theological studies. Episcopal conferences have the responsibility to plan their formation program.¹⁸

Article 90 of our Constitutions states that *the provincial must establish a fitting length of time for students, after completing their theological studies, to exercise the order of diaconate before they are promoted to priesthood.* In spite of all these requirements, this privilege is in force and gives power to dispense from the above requirements.

20. Major superiors of the Congregation of the Mission can dispense their subjects from all occult irregularities but only in the internal forum.

There is no distinction made with regard to irregularities in receiving orders and irregularities in the exercise of orders. In both

¹⁸ James A. Coriden and others, 726 - 727.

cases, said dispensation has to take place in the internal forum.¹⁹ Canon 1044 §1 states: *The following are irregular for the exercise of orders received: (1) a person who has received orders illegitimately while affected by an irregularity to receive them; (2) a person who has committed a delict mentioned in can. 1041, n. 2, if the delict is public; (3) a person who has committed a delict mentioned in can. 1041, nn. 3, 4, 5, 6.*

- 21a. Visitors and Local Superiors of the Congregation of the Mission can dispense their subjects from irregularities and simple impediments in the internal forum (in both public and occult cases) (except those reserved to the Apostolic See).
- 21b. The priests of the Congregation of the Mission can dispense their *alumni* (members) from irregularities and simple impediments (in both public and occult cases), in the internal forum, in the sacrament of confession (except those reserved to the Apostolic See).
- 21c. The priests of the Congregation of the Mission can dispense all the faithful, who have contracted irregularities and simple impediments, in occult cases and in the internal forum (except those reserved to the Apostolic See).

VII. Privileges concerning the Liturgy

22. Major superiors, local superiors, and personal confessors of the Congregation of the Mission can dispense their subjects from reciting the Liturgy of the Hours, when there is a proportionate reason, only on condition that the individual will recite some other prayers.

¹⁹ Irregularities to receive orders are listed in Canon 1041: (1) a person who labors under some form of *amentia* or other psychic illness due to which, after experts have been consulted, he is judged unqualified to fulfill the ministry properly; (2) a person who has committed the delict of apostasy, heresy, or schism; (3) a person who has attempted marriage, even only civilly, while either impeded personally from entering marriage by a matrimonial bond, sacred orders, or a public perpetual vow of chastity, or with a woman bound by a valid marriage or restricted by the same type of vow; (4) a person who has committed voluntary homicide or procured a completed abortion and all those who positively cooperated in either; (5) a person who has mutilated himself or another gravely and maliciously or who has attempted suicide; (6) a person who has performed an act of orders reserved to those in the order of episcopate or presbyterate while either lacking that order or prohibited from its exercise by some declared or imposed canonical penalty.

The present *Code* obliges priests and deacons aspiring to priesthood to pray the Liturgy of the Hours, using their own approved liturgical books (Canon 276 §2, 3^o). There is a further reference to this Canon, which specifically mentions the members of Institutes of Consecrated Life and of Societies of Apostolic Life (1174 §1). Our Constitutions (C 45 §3) exhort us with the following words: *In celebrating the liturgy of the hours, we unite our hearts and voices to sing the praises of the Lord, raise our prayer continually in his sight, and intercede for people everywhere. For this reason, we celebrate morning and evening prayer in common, unless excused because of the apostolate.*

The above-stated norms establish the obligation of the clergy to pray the Liturgy of the Hours. It is in light of all of this that we have to situate this privilege. The privilege to commute an individual from praying the Liturgy of the Hours is to be substituted by the recitation of other (vocal?) prayers. Extraordinary pastoral work could be a reason to dispense from reciting the Liturgy of the Hours. Relaxation from the ecclesiastical law to pray the Liturgy of the Hours is to be perceived as a privilege and we must never lose sight of the value in praying the Divine Office.²⁰

VIII. Privileges Concerning Temporal Goods

23. Immovable goods, precious movable goods, rights and legal claims, whether personal or real, which belong to the juridical person of the Congregation of the Mission, are prescribed not by a period of 30 years as stated in Canon 1270, but 100 years.

Canon 1270 establishes the period for prescription as 30 years for items described as immovable goods, precious moveable goods, rights and legal actions, both personal and real of juridical person and 100 years for the Apostolic See. Prescription is a means of acquiring or losing rights, or of freeing oneself from obligations by the passage of time (Canon 197). The church recognizes prescription as a means of acquiring temporal goods and freeing oneself from them (Canon 1268). By 'prescribed goods,' is meant goods that have considerable value because of artistic, historical, or material value.²¹ The secular laws of each country govern all other cases. This privilege includes

²⁰ Miguel Pérez Flores, 63-64.

²¹ *Exegetical Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, Vol. IV/1 (Chicago: Midwest Theological Forum, 2004), 73.

goods that belong to the juridical person of the Congregation of the Mission and, as stated in the Canon, goods belonging to the Apostolic See have a period of prescription of 100 years. It is important to remember that this privilege is valid only for the ecclesiastical forum.²²

- 24. The Superior General can give permission to alienate the temporal goods of the Congregation of the Mission without the consent of his Council if the said process fulfills the norms established by the universal law of the Church.**

Canon 638 §3 obliges the Superiors General of Societies of Apostolic Life to obtain the consent of their Councils (also Canon 741) for the alienation of temporal goods.²³ Our Constitutions, in Article 155, establish the same.²⁴ However, this privilege allows the Superior General to act contrary to what is given in the common law of the Church and contrary to what is prescribed in the Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission. Since this is a delicate matter, it is best that the Superior General seek the consent of his Council. If, however, he does not seek the consent of his council and instead invokes this privilege, his decision would be valid.²⁵

- 25. The Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission (if he prudently judges it necessary) has the competence to decide that the goods of one house be given to another house that is in need.**

This privilege is in force because neither the Constitutions nor the Statutes of the Congregation of the Mission have explicit norms with regard to this matter. According to our Constitutions, Article 150 §1, houses, local communities, and provinces are able to acquire, possess, administer, and alienate temporal goods. This privilege might seem to show a lack of respect for the autonomy of the houses of the

²² Miguel Pérez Flores, 69.

²³ For the validity of alienation, and of any transaction by which patrimonial condition of the juridical person could be adversely affected, there is required the written permission of the competent Superior, given with the consent of his or her council. Moreover, the permission of the Holy See is required if the transaction involves a sum exceeding that which the Holy See has determined for each region, or if it concerns things donated to the Church as a result of a vow, or objects which are precious by reason of their artistic or historical significance (Canon 638 § 3).

²⁴ For the validity of alienation and any other transaction in which the patrimonial condition of a juridical person can be affected adversely, there is required the written permission of the competent superior with the consent of his council. If moreover, it concerns a transaction, which exceeds the highest amount defined for a given region by the Holy See, or items given to the Church in virtue of a vow, or items of precious art or of historical value, the permission of the Holy See is also required (C 155).

²⁵ Miguel Pérez Flores, 70.

Congregation. However, if the Superior General judges it necessary, he has the power to make use of this privilege for the overall good of the Congregation.

26. Major superiors of the Congregation of the Mission can change the destination of the goods received from a legacy *inter vivos* to another purpose but they must always avoid giving scandal.

This privilege is an exception to Canon 1300,²⁶ which insists on fulfilling and respecting the intentions of the faithful who donate goods to ecclesial institutions. This privilege allows goods that have been received for one purpose to be designated for another purpose. Disposing of goods received for a pious intention is not foreseen here.

27. The Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission, in case of necessity and utility of the houses, can sell immovable goods, if they are not higher than the amount established by the Holy See even if contrary to the provisions in the last will. This can be done after consulting with two or three experts about the value of such goods.

It is important to fulfill the intention and the conditions under which immovable goods are received, especially when these goods are bequeathed through an individual's "last will and testament." Even though circumstances may arise that justify changing the purpose for which these goods will be utilized, nevertheless much caution should be used when considering the process of alienation.²⁷

IX. Plenary Indulgences granted to the Congregation of the Mission

Pope Paul VI wanted to change the practice with regard to indulgences. He requested that Religious Congregations, Orders, Societies of Apostolic Life, Secular Institutes, and Pious Associations revise their indulgences. Plenary indulgences could be gained only on specific days established by the Holy See. Such indulgences would be granted when requested by the Superior General or the ordinary.

²⁶ The intentions of the faithful who give or leave goods to pious causes, whether by an act *inter vivos* or by an act *mortis causa*, once lawfully accepted, are to be most carefully observed, even in the manner of the administration and the expending of the goods, without prejudice to the provisions of Can. 1301 § 3 (Can. 1300).

²⁷ Miguel Pérez Flores, 72.

The Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission manifested his desire and petitioned the Holy Father to recognize the indulgences that had already been granted in the past. The same was requested for the Daughters of Charity. The Congregation of the Mission received a reply from the Sacred Penitentiary on 28 October 1967, a reply in which the request had been granted.²⁸ The plenary indulgences of the Congregation of the Mission and Daughters of Charity are perpetual in nature, whereas for pontifical associations, like the Association of the Miraculous Medal, those indulgences are granted for seven years (at the end of seven years the Superior General has to request, in writing, the renewal of those indulgences).

The Sacred Penitentiary granted plenary indulgences to the Congregation of the Mission with the conditions to fulfill and stated that certain conditions had to be fulfilled, namely, reception of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, participation in the Holy Eucharist, and offering prayers for the intentions of the Holy Father.

- 28. All the members of the Congregation of the Mission can gain plenary indulgences on the following occasions if the above-mentioned conditions are fulfilled:**
- a. Solemnity of Saint Vincent de Paul (27 September)
 - b. Feast of the Miraculous Medal (27 November)
 - c. Solemnity of Saint Louise de Marillac (9 May)
 - d. Feast of Saint Catherine Labouré (28 November)
 - e. Feast of Saint John Gabriel Perboyre (11 September)
 - f. Feast of Saint Francis Regis Clet (18 February)
 - g. Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul, Foundation of the Congregation of the Mission (25 January)
 - h. On the celebration of the General Assembly.
- 29. All the members of the Congregation of the Mission, by fulfilling the above conditions, can gain a plenary indulgence:**
- a. On the feast of the patron saint of the house
 - b. On the feast days of the Saints and Blessed whose remains or relics are kept in the house
 - c. At the end of any regular visit to the Blessed Sacrament.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 122.

30. All the members of the Congregation of the Mission, by fulfilling the above conditions, can gain a plenary indulgence on the following occasions:
- a. On the day of entering the Internal Seminary
 - a. On the day of good purposes
 - a. On the day of perpetual vows
 - a. When celebrating their 25th, 50th, 60th, 70th anniversary of vows.

These privileges with regard to plenary indulgences are perpetual.²⁹

²⁹ Here I have dealt with those privileges that pertain to the Congregation of the Mission and have not included any of the privileges pertaining to the Daughters of Charity or any other institute or association of the Vincentian Family.

Appreciative Discernment

by: Joseph V. Agostino, C.M.
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Introduction

At the December 2014 meeting of the Preparatory Commission, we heard a presentation on a methodology which may be used to guide the discussions of the delegates at our upcoming General Assembly: Appreciative Discernment (AD).

At the heart of this process lies the belief that the usual starting point for discussion – dealing with problems or weaknesses – is a negative way to begin a conversation that we hope will lead to fruitful change.

It is much more effective to begin by asking ourselves: what do we do well and how can we grow these strengths throughout the Congregation? There is an expression that states, “Your point of view shapes your life.” When our starting point is the narrative of the richness of our Vincentian charism throughout its many cultural manifestations, then we are better poised to respond to the call of the poor today.

What Is Appreciative Discernment?

Appreciative Discernment is a process based on a theory of change called “Appreciative Inquiry.” Many articles have been written on its nature. Most of them are taken from a business or social perspective dealing with the organizational dynamics of such change. This methodology has one absolute principle: the “focus is on the positive because a positive focus leads to positive action” (*Appreciative Discernment*, William Nordenbrock, CPPS, p.4).

Rather than looking at it from a sociological perspective, I would like to place it in a Biblical and Vincentian one. The first step begins with the name. “Inquiry” is a term which can easily be replaced by “Discernment.”

“Discernment is the process by which we, individually and communally, seek to know the will of God and to make the positive choice to align our lives with the divine will” (Nordenbrock, p.1). As Saint Vincent de Paul said, “Oh Monsieur, what a happiness to will

nothing but what God wills, to do nothing but what is in accord with the occasion Providence presents, and to have nothing but what God in His Providence has given us” (*Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, 3:193).

Speaking of this providence, Jesus said to his disciples: “I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). Appreciative Discernment begins with a disciple’s affirmation of the goodness of God, the beauty of creation, and the inherent dignity of men and women created in God’s image and likeness. We have been blessed, first with the gift of life. And that blessing has been augmented with the gift of God’s love made incarnate through Jesus and made irrevocable by the power of his Resurrection.

Starting from this perspective, AD seeks to approach change through a “search for the best in people, their organizations and communities, and the world around them” (*The Change Handbook*, p. 276). Thus it seeks to understand what gives life to us as a Congregation and to base our planning processes on our strengths.

This is not to say that we do not deal with problems. Nor is it an attempt to fabricate an idyllic picture of community life. When problems arise they are validated as a part of our lived experience as Vincentians and are reframed so that they may lead us to positive actions.

Examples of AD questions may include:

1. Describe a time in the life of your province which you considered a highpoint, when the confreres were most engaged and felt most alive and creative.
2. What do you most value about yourself and your ministry? What are the gifts with which God has blessed you for your service of the poor?
3. What are the dynamics/factors at work in your province when it is at its best?
4. Imagine your province ten years from now, when everything is just as you wish it would be. What is different from how it is now? How have you contributed to this dream?

How does AD Lead to Positive Change?

AD calls us to shift from problem solving to a positive analysis of what lies at the heart of our Vincentian charism and mission. In this way, it does not do a SWOT

(Strengths/Weaknesses/Opportunities/Threats) Analysis, but rather seeks to unearth the root causes of our strengths as a Congregation. The process, though simple, can lead to profound changes in the life of the Congregation from an individual confrere to the Curia in Rome.

An outline of this process follows.

I. Discovery: appreciating and valuing the best of “what is”

The starting point involves the affirmation of “best practices” that exist throughout the Congregation. We unveil our positive core, recognizing how God has blessed us. This is the most important step in the process because it focuses us on the future that we hope to create together as a Congregation. We have many instances of best practices throughout the world. Ramzi’s school of faith (Lebanon) and the experience of expanding from the Province of Australia to the Province of Oceania are but two examples worth studying. Discovery explores what gives us life and zeal for the Mission.

“A foundational belief that guides us is that our God will never leave us orphaned ... Our mission is defined and fulfilled when we fully bring the charisma that we have received to the Church and the world” (Nordenbrock, p. 5).

II. Dream: envisioning what “might be”

As we study our best practices, we ask how we can build upon them and make them the “new norm” for our life as a Congregation. What might be? What would we look like if our communities embraced these practices on the local, provincial, and Congregational levels? What are the signs of the times and the voices of the poor calling us to be and to do? What is the world calling from us? By imagining our best possible future, we also acknowledge the work of grace in our lives.

III. Design: dialoging about what “should be”

What are the concrete steps that we can take, based on our strengths, to enable these new norms to become part of the fabric of our life as a Congregation? How can we embrace our future with courage and responsibility? What can we innovate to create our preferred future?

IV. Destiny: How can we strengthen our capacity as a Congregation to build hope and sustain our zeal for these new directions? Thus we turn our dreams into actions which will help us remain faithful to our charisma.

An Application of the AD Model

Research has shown that the utilization of an AD model has created a culture or a “passion for service” within those organizations that have used it. Without a doubt, and in all humility, the Congregation has served and continues to serve well. But we also live by a Fifth Vow: the Vow of Silence! Throughout our many provinces most “best practices” are not identified, shared, or replicated. Our collective wisdom remains an underground river giving life to many yet untapped in its potential to be of even greater service to the poor. The following application may help us better understand how AD might unleash this wellspring of apostolic zeal.

I will apply the process to one of the three major themes of the upcoming General Assembly: solidarity among the provinces of the Congregation.

The context: in an article that appeared in the January-March 2015 issue of *Vincentiana*, we read:

Economic Solidarity is not a new concept in the Congregation. In our rule on poverty, Vincent de Paul wrote: “Members of the Congregation, individually and collectively, should understand that, following the example of the first Christians, all our belongings are common property...” (CR III, 3). The Constitutions specify this further: “The Congregation of the Mission possesses temporal goods for pastoral and community needs ... it administers these goods, however, as the patrimony of the poor, with solicitude, but with no attempt to grow rich” (C 148, § 1). They go on to say: “Provinces and houses should share their temporal goods with each other so that those who have more help those in need” (C 152, § 1). Such assistance is a demand of charity and justice. It is not simply an act of generosity. As such, it even challenges the most generous among us to give beyond our present levels of giving.

We are an international Congregation almost since the time of our foundation. But we will not become a global community until we have embraced solidarity both as individual confreres and as provincial entities. The realization of our true missionary vocation will come about as we grow in the lived experience of belonging not to a specific ministry, nor to a particular province, but to a Congregation that both encompasses and supersedes these realities. No matter where we are assigned, we are confreres called to the service of the Mission as friends who love one another deeply (cf. C 25, 1°) And as dear friends, we care

for each other's needs (Gay – Agostino, *Underlying Themes of General Assembly 2016: Multiculturalism, Solidarity, and Collaboration*, p. 142).

What might be one way to apply AD to this important area of the life of the Congregation? It might take the shape of the process outlined below.

I. Discovery

- a. We are members of an international Congregation. When have you most felt yourself a part of our worldwide community?
- b. What gifts, talents, and treasures have you and your province placed at the service of the Congregation beyond your borders?

II. Dream

- a. As we listen to our stories, what are the blessings and characteristics of who we are when we are at our best?
- b. What would it look like if these blessings or gifts were fully utilized and given for the benefit of the Congregation and the poor whom we serve?

III. Design

- a. How can we structure these realities, molding them into a Call to Action for the international Congregation?

IV. Destiny

- a. What mechanisms should we create to evaluate and sustain these interprovincial initiatives?

Why AD Works

Our engagement in the process of AD will enrich the quality of our relationships as confreres, as provinces, and as an international community. It does so by fostering a greater spirit of collaboration, which is born out of a new depth in our knowledge of one another.

Meeting one another as brothers – maybe for the first time – can be a liberating experience. AD is seen as an instrument that releases the following dynamics among its practitioners.

A. the freedom to be known in relationship

This comes from a depth of sharing that goes well beyond the roles we play. It offers us a chance to appreciate each other's unique dignity as a child of God and a son of Vincent. "Love, like that between brothers, should always be present among us ... For this reason there should be great mutual respect, and we should get along as good friends, always living in community" (CR VIII, 2).

B. the freedom to be heard

So often people speak at one another rather than listening to what is being said. The C&S remind us that “we should pay close attention to the opinions and needs of each confrere humbly and fraternally, thereby working to overcome the difficulties involved in community life...” (C 24, 3°).

C. the freedom to dream in community

Where there is no vision the people perish. Our Congregation should be a safe haven where confreres from diverse cultural backgrounds can together envision the future that Vincent challenged us to embrace. “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” (CCD, IX, 194).

D. the freedom to choose to contribute

When we collaborate together, exploring our options as a community, we make a deliberate choice to use our gifts in the service of one another. Our C&S, in speaking about our communal life together, remind us that “the evangelization of the poor, which gives to all our work a unity that does not stifle diverse talents and gifts but directs them to the service of the mission” (C 25, 2°). Thus, creativity is engendered and zeal is stoked.

E. the freedom to act with support

To know that other confreres and provinces care about what you do fosters solidarity and cooperation while encouraging innovation. It calls forth the best in all of us.

F. the freedom to be positive

We live in a world which all too often emphasizes the negative, the worst of the human condition. AD frees us to be people of the Word – understanding at ever deepening levels the presence and action of God in the midst of our story today.

AD is in some ways a tool for the taking of a prophetic stance in our world today. By shifting our perspectives, we are able to base our actions on principles, which are better suited to building up the Church, the Congregation, and the poor whom we serve. What follows are two such principles.

1. The principle of Systemic Change

By viewing our Congregation as a living, social system, we are better poised to understand the dynamics of the communities in which we live, those whom we serve, and even the world around us.

2. The principle of Collaboration

Inquiry and change happen simultaneously. By asking the right questions, we set the stage for what we discover, constructing a future that strengthens the bonds of our relationships with each other. Creating that image together is probably the most important aspect of the change we seek. The more positive the questions we ask, the more long-lasting and successful the change we seek.

Conclusion

Albert Einstein once said, “There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.” As confreres who live in the miracle of the Resurrection, we can only offer life and hope to those whom we serve. All of our relationships thrive when we see the best in others and when we acknowledge the gifts that God has given them. Thus, we affirm their desire to participate in the ongoing creation and redemption of the world in which Jesus stands at the center and all men and women live in the dignity with which they were created.

AD is not a panacea, by any means. But it can be a useful tool in our creation of a prophetic revolution of change. As was mentioned at the Meeting of Mission Superiors in Rome in September 2015, being prophetic means being countercultural at times. Only dead fish flow with the current. We are called to flow against the current, to be alive! “According to the varying circumstances of time and place, our work of evangelization ... should be faithful to *‘the kingdom, that is to say, the new world, the new order, the new manner of being, of living, of living in community, which the gospel inaugurates’*” (EN 23), (C 11).

Mercy in Our Vincentian Being

Monsieur Vincent, Apostle of Mercy

Bernard Koch, C.M.

Context

Devotion to Divine Mercy is not a new idea; it stands in a direct line of one of the many currents of Revelation, in the Bible, in the great river that is the history of the Church, and amongst the Fathers, the theologians, and other spiritual authors. What follows is a preamble in order to contextualise Divine Mercy.

It is one of the essential characteristics of God, “God of Mercy and Pity,” Psalm 86 (85):15, and others. There are two Hebrew words: *Rahamim*, which more properly refers to mercy, and, somewhat more frequently, *Hésed*, which refers to mercy, but also to love in general, which latter is insufficient as *Hésed* is a quasi-visceral feeling which urges one to love, assist, help from the depths of the heart. It goes further than the words ‘pardon’ and ‘compassion’; the Bible uses the word ‘womb,’ *viscera*, (in French ‘entrailles’) and we say that we are ‘formed in the womb.’

The word Charity also had this sense, though it has become restricted to ‘charitable’ application.

Mercy implies going even as far as self-sacrifice, if necessary, in order to save even one who has done us wrong. This was, above all else, the work of Our Lord Jesus Christ, announced in Isaiah, 53:5, “he was wounded for our sins,” strongly emphasised by Saint Paul as well as the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews and others throughout the centuries.

German has no other word for Charity except Mercy.

Let us note at the outset that, in the Old Testament and, to a degree, in the New, even in the mouth of Our Lord, God does not always act in mercy.

God offers mercy to those who repent, who ask it of him and accept it, to those who show mercy: in Saint Matthew (5:7), it is the fifth beatitude.

On the other hand, he cannot ‘impose’ mercy on those who are hard of heart, as we see in the final words of the judgement of Christ ‘go, therefore, to the eternal fire’ (Matthew 25:41, 45-46). It is not the case that he refuses mercy, rather that he can offer it only to those willing to receive it; this is the essence of the problem of God’s All Powerfulness and the free will of human beings.

Still, some phrases have troubled many people throughout the centuries. As at Horeb, in the episode following the Golden Calf and the pardon that Moses asks of God, the Lord replies: “you have found favour before me, I know you by your name” and Moses asks God to show him his glory. God replies “I will show it to you and I will show mercy to those I wish and I will be clement to those it has pleased me” (Exodus 33:19).

This phrase is taken up by Saint Paul in his epistle to the Romans (9:15). He has just recalled the promises made by God to Abraham, then the choice of Jacob in place of Esau, citing Malachi, 1:2-3: “I have loved Jacob and hated Esau.” He continues: “what can we say? Is God unjust? No. God says to Moses, ‘I will show mercy to those to whom I show mercy, I will have compassion on those on whom I have compassion.’ It is not a question of human will or effort, but of God being merciful” (Romans 9:15-16).

We recall that God never refuses mercy to those who seek and ask for it, but he is not obliged to it; it is He who decides. Simply put, he calls each to his/her proper place and role, where he/she receives mercies, graces, and gifts. We can have confidence in God, the Father of Mercies, all the while knowing that we have no power at all over him.

“**Misericordia**” is composed of two words: “**miseria** (pity)” and “**cor** (heart),” a heart that is open to pity, to those who suffer in body or in soul, pain or loss, or who may cause pain or loss and who ask pardon. More especially, mercy, God’s mercy, extends most of all to those who do not deserve love.

A closely allied term is “**compassion**,” “to suffer with.”

This word is linked with an even more concrete word: “**womb** (or guts).”

A beautiful example is given in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:20 and 31). For the younger son who returns, the father is full of mercy; the original Greek translates as 'he was grasped in the guts'; it is a pity that a misplaced prurience means that this translation is not used.

Mercy is proper to God, as are Love and Charity, and Mercy is exercised by the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ, unto the Cross. Only God truly is merciful, those who do the works of mercy and those who ask God to show mercy to sinners and to the poor, are not the source of mercy, they are only his instruments, though they truly are that.

Let us conclude by saying that God can do all things but he does not wish to do it without us.

This visceral aspect of mercy is noted by several saints. Saint BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX (1090/1091-1153) meditated a great deal on the wounds of Jesus. He shows us, in his "Sermon 61 on the Song of Songs," that the wounds of Jesus are the guarantee of his mercy:¹

"The secret of his heart are seen in the openings of his body, we see there the great mystery of his infinite goodness, the womb of the mercy of our God, by which the rising Sun has come to us from on high. How could the womb be seen except through these wounds?"

It is on the cross that the mercy of the Father is fulfilled, by the body and blood of his Son, who declared at the Last Supper, "This is my body, given for you," "this is the chalice of my blood which will be poured out for you." It is in the Mass, as in the other sacraments, that Jesus makes present his great work of mercy.

Saint CATHERINE OF SIENNA (1347-1380) in her *Dialogue* has two Treatises on Mercy, in chapters 14 to 87, asking Mercy of the Father for the Church and mercy for the world. More recently, Saint Faustina Kowalska (1905-1938) offered her life to the mercy of God for the conversion of sinners.²

¹ There are many editions. Besides Migne Latin (which follows the edition of the Benedictines, by Dom Jean Mabillon) there are many others; in Latin, in French, and bilingual and there are two websites:

Latin: http://www.binetti.ru/bernardus/pl182_index.shtml and

French: <http://www.abbaye-saint-benoit.ch/saints/bernard/index.htm>

² See various sites, such as http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faustine_Kowalska and http://www.misericordedivine.org/catechese/c_lheure.html

We come then to the practice: since the beginning of the Church, from the time of the Acts and Epistles of the Apostles, there have been the works of mercy, for the poor, the sick, the widows, the orphans, and the abandoned children.

It is time to come now to Saint Vincent de Paul.

Vincent often expressed the mercy of God, confiding either himself or his correspondents to God's mercy, and expressing his thanks for graces received from the divine mercy.

He frequently says or writes: "by the divine mercy" or "by the mercy of God." All that was good or turned to good for him, all the conversions and progress in the Christian life are "by God's mercy." He sees the same at work in the lives of the men and women who write to him, as in the lives of many others of the time.

He contemplates the proof and source of divine mercy, Jesus crucified, in the details of his suffering and recommends meditating on them.

It is useful, without a doubt, for people who may not know Saint Vincent, to present episodes from his life.

He was born near Dax, in 1581, in Gascony, a region that was recovering, with difficulty, from the ravages of the wars of religion, born into a family, which included farmers on his father's side and notaries on his mother's side, and Christian on both sides. He had not thought to become a priest; his family encouraged him towards the clerical state simply that he might benefit from income from the Church, to which end it was sufficient simply to receive the tonsure. It was one of his mentors who encouraged him to go on to priesthood. His goal remained to find funds to assist his parents and his five sisters and brothers.

Ordained at 19 years of age, in 1600, he was to continue to seek such funds in various places, according to his biographers.

Let us move on to Rome, towards the autumn of 1607, from which he would receive a mission for Henry IV in October 1608. He was to find himself in Paris, which he would never again leave as his mission base; his relations would find him still there at the end of 1613, as chaplain to the General of the Galleys of France. He was to take on ministry in the parishes on the lands of these noble lords, and, in an organised fashion from 25 January 1617, was to add to that the

foundation of successive Confraternities of Charity, starting in the month of August 1617.

His life was to be lived out to the end in the works of mercy, in the spiritual and corporal services of the poor of all kinds, including the galley slaves, and, from 1633, with the Daughters of Charity. From 1638, he took on the service of ‘abandoned children,’ all the while engaged with the formation of future priests and the intellectual and spiritual support of priests.

From 1635, the wars in Lorraine and then in Picardy impelled him to bring help to the populations who had survived in misery for 25 years.

Preoccupied by the state of the slaves of the Muslims in Northern Africa, he sent missionaries to Tunis and Algiers from 1645.

Everywhere there were people in material and spiritual poverty, people to support and to convert, following his two criteria: “spiritual and bodily care,” and “by words and deeds.”

Let us see firstly, the works of mercy on God’s part for us, then of us for others, or others for us, which calls us to ask for God’s mercy for sinners, which includes all of us.

I- God’s mercy for us.

God shows us his mercy by sustaining us in our efforts and in difficult moments, our progress comes from him and not solely from our own strength. We have seen all this, Monsieur Vincent repeats: “by the mercy of God.”

On 9 October 1640, he writes to Étienne Blatiron, priest of the Mission:³

“Perfection consists in a constant perseverance to acquire the virtues and become proficient in their practice ... Now the way to do that, Monsieur, is to be continually grateful for God’s mercy and goodness to us, and to have a constant or frequent fear of rendering ourselves unworthy and of failing to be faithful to our little exercises.”

³ *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 II, p. 146; future references to this work use the initials CCD, followed by the volume number, then the page number, for example, CCD, II, 146.

The mercy of God is experienced firstly in the face of our sins.

Vincent always referred to himself as a great sinner, far from perfection, and asked his confreres to implore God's mercy for him. Here is one of the many texts, from 3 February 1641, written to Louis Lebreton in Rome:⁴

“The Company is increasing in number and in virtue, by the mercy of God, which everyone recognizes and which was apparent to me during the visitations. I am the only wretch who keeps on heaping new iniquities and abominations on myself. O Monsieur, how merciful God is to put up with me with so much patience and forbearance, and how weak and miserable I am to abuse his mercies so greatly!”

Saint John shows us the greatness of the mercy of God in his first epistle (3:20): “if our heart accuses us, God is far greater than our heart.”

Vincent echoes him at least twice:

Firstly, with regard to himself and his distractions in prayer, when he was busy with many things, he explains to Louise de Marillac in September 1642:⁵

“I have been involved in business matters this whole morning, able to make only a little prayer and that with many distractions; ... Still, this does not discourage me, because I place my confidence in God and not, indeed, in my own preparation nor in all my efforts, and I wish you the same with all my heart, since the throne of God's goodness and mercies is established on the foundation of our miseries. Let us trust then in His goodness and we shall never be put to shame, as He assures us by His word.”

Three years later, he wrote the same on the notes that he proposed as a prayer for a dying Brother who was, doubtless, thinking back fearfully of his sins:⁶

“Now, it's certain that one of the greatest honors and the greatest glory you're capable of rendering Him right now is to hope with your whole heart in His goodness and infinite

⁴ CCD, II, 173.

⁵ CCD, II, 323-324.

⁶ CCD, XI, 130.

merits, despite this necessary unworthiness and those infidelities committed in the past; for the throne of His mercy is the greatness of the faults to be forgiven.”

This is nothing new. Saint JEROME already, about the year 400, in his *Commentary on Joel*, on “Come back to me with all your heart,” in the *Breviary*, Friday, Week 21, had written as follows:

“Come back to the Lord your God, from whom your past sins had made you a stranger and do not doubt his pardon on account of the greatness of your sins, for his great mercy blots out our great sins.”

Against or besides our sins, there are:

- on one side, the exaggerations of activity or of penitence;
- on another, there are the limits of our spirit, things forgotten, lack of understanding of our situation, or of means of finding solutions to problems;
- and there are the limitations of our body, illness, weakness, age.

On 4 August 1655, after 30 years of experience in the ‘Little Company,’ as he called it, he gave an entire conference on the subject: “Excesses to be Avoided in the Love of God”.⁷

“... those that are too fervent must be given moderation for fear that they may go to excess; those who, under the pretext of not inconveniencing themselves, have no fervor at all and make no acts must be prodded and awakened a little; ... We have to make provision for the necessities of nature, since God has made us subject to them, and adapt to its weakness. That’s what God wills; ... He’s well aware of our woes and in His compassion and mercy, supplies for our defects. We must act very simply with Him and not be so anxious about this; His goodness and mercy will provide whatever we need.

And, in the final prayer:

“O Savior, You know what my heart wants to say; it turns to You, fountain of mercy; You see its desires; they tend only to You, they aspire only to You, they want only You.”

Let us recall this beautiful praise of God, fount of all mercy.

⁷ CCD, XI, 207-209.

Whether or not one is a great sinner, the love of God and the salvation which he gained for us far outstrip our merits; it is God who takes the initiative, we have many examples of this throughout the Bible, especially in the call of the prophets: Isaiah 44:2, 24; 49:1, 5 and Jeremiah 1:5.

He writes often to Louise de Marillac to comfort her in her moments of fear about not being in the right state of life; for example the following (around 1632): “Be fully confident that you are the dear daughter of Our Lord, through His mercy.”⁸

“Child of God by mercy,” this is the source of our great abandonment of ourselves, entirely, to the mercy of God.

II- Our mercy towards others.

The works of mercy were the great work of Monsieur Vincent and his disciples. They are founded on **three inseparable virtues: charity, mercy, and justice** – the one never seen without the others.

God, who is mercy, has created humanity in God’s own likeness and image, and it follows then that, in the image of God, we must become “**people of mercy**” as Ecclesiasticus or Sirach (44:10) presents the ancient fathers from Enoch to the Prophets. The Septuagint and Vulgate declare, “**these are the merciful ones.**” Saint Paul exhorts the Colossians (3:12) “**clothe yourselves in the ‘womb’ of mercy,**” which the Jerusalem Bible and Osty is rendered as “**feelings of compassion**”; but why fear the word “womb”? It is true that it takes people today by surprise, since it is a term that has fallen from use, replaced by words that sound less abrasive.

Our era, which displays the human body from angles, has become timid when faced with liturgical and biblical language, even though the word ‘womb/guts’ is found throughout the Bible, this term of mercy is far more evocative than love, or compassion, or pity.

To return to the practice of mercy, of which prayer and offerings form a part, let us listen to Vincent on 2 November 1656 in a conference to his confreres; it reads as a true litany and is good to read as such, as the repetitions sink in:⁹

⁸ CCD, I, 145.

⁹ CCD, XI, 328-329.

“They [the Daughters of Charity] practice mercy, that beautiful virtue of which it’s said, ‘Mercy is the distinctive feature of God.’ We practice it, too, and must do so all our lives: corporal mercy, spiritual mercy, mercy in the rural areas and in the missions by hastening to meet the needs of our neighbor, mercy when we’re at home with regard to the retreatants, and with regard to the poor, by teaching them the things necessary for salvation, and in so many other circumstances God presents to us.”

He is very aware that we are not the authors of our good actions for “without me you can do nothing,” as Jesus says in Saint John (15:5). We are only the instruments of God, but it is, nevertheless, our dignity to be called by God to be his instruments.

God shows his mercy in action and in the prayer of Christians, but he may also show it through the actions of non-Christians, whether or not they are conscious of it, and it is good for us to be aware of this. We see this in the first text that comes to us from Saint Vincent. In the first letter in which he explains how he had managed to escape from Tunis where he had been a slave, with his master, the renegade, he teaches us through whom God had shown him this mercy:¹⁰

“A renegade from Nice in Savoy, hostile by nature, bought me and took me to his *temat*; that is what they call the land that one holds as a sharecropper of the Grand Lord, because the people own nothing; everything belongs to the Sultan ... One of the three wives that he had ... a native Turk, who served God’s immense mercy as an instrument in recalling her husband from apostasy and restoring him to the bosom of the Church, brought about my deliverance from slavery.”

Do we recognise the powerful sound of this phrase in our ears? A merciful Islamic woman is the instrument of the mercy of God!

Mercy or Justice?

Saint Vincent de Paul, nephew of a lawyer, procurator of the King at the Tribunal in Dax, had, at one and the same time, a great sense of justice and of the poor. **For him, mercy towards the poor and the sick is not a matter of simple benevolence; it is a duty, not only of charity,**

¹⁰ CCD, I, 7-8.

but of justice – he wrote as much on 8 March 1658, to Firmin Get, Superior in Marseilles, who served the galley-slaves:¹¹

“I praise God for the charity the city of Marseilles is showing to the poor in their present need and for the timely help you have procured for the convicts suffering from the cold weather and poverty. God will grant you the grace, Monsieur ... of realizing that in helping them we are doing an act of justice and not of mercy! They are our brothers, whom God commands us to help...”

How do we reconcile mercy and justice? In 1638, Louise de Marillac had to deal with the case of a Sister who was both harsh and intractable, hesitating between keeping her (as mercy demanded) or sending her away (as justice demanded). Vincent wrote to her:¹²

“Jeanne, the Daughter of Charity in this parish [Saint-Laurent], has committed many faults, on account of which the Pastor, the officers, and M. de Vincy decided today that she must be changed. I entreat you, Mademoiselle, to send us another who has a more gentle and more accommodating disposition ... Now I think, nevertheless, that we must take her back for the Hotel-Dieu or somewhere else, so that justice may be accompanied by mercy.”

Mercy does not go without justice nor justice without mercy. However, they are neither truly themselves without the other.

The works of mercy are of two kinds according to the ends of the various confraternities and associations: material help and spiritual help.

1. Service of the Body

The works of mercy encounter many obstacles, especially in regions that are poor and afflicted by bad weather or epidemics, such as in times of war or revolutions, the lack of subsistence, which Saint Vincent frequently encountered in his own time.

Bernard Codoing, Superior of the Mission at Annecy, asked Monsieur Vincent for the gift of Mass intentions in order to sustain the needs of the poor populace of the mountains around Annecy. On 26 July 1640, Monsieur Vincent answered:¹³

¹¹ CCD, VII, 115.

¹² CCD, I, 449.

¹³ CCD, II, 92.

“I certainly do not see how ... the extreme poverty of the age is greatly dampening enthusiasm for alms and Mass stipends.”

Assistance is a good thing, but we must pay attention to the manner in which we do it. One should read the whole conference of 6 August 1656 to the Missioners, on the spirit of mercy. Vincent has a formula that anticipates what the 20th century was to call empathy:¹⁴

“When we go to visit poor persons, we have to sympathize with them in order to suffer with them, and put ourselves in the dispositions of that great Apostle, who said, *Omnibus omnia factus sum* (1 Corinthians 9:22); I have made myself all to all, so that the complaint Our Lord formerly made through one of the Prophets, *Sustinui qui simul mecum contristaretur, et non fuit* (Psalm 69:21) doesn’t fall on us: ‘I waited to see if someone would sympathize with me in my sufferings, and there was none.’ ”

“In order to do that, it is important to seek to make our hearts tender ... and to pray God that he will give us a true spirit of mercy, which is God’s very spirit; for as the Church says, it is God’s nature to be merciful and to bestow its spirit” [in the Prayer of the Litanies of the Saints].

“Let us be merciful, therefore, my brothers, and let us practice mercy towards all, in such a way that we may never find a poor person without consoling them nor an ignorant person without teaching them, in a few words, what is necessary for him to believe and which will serve for his salvation.” This leads us on to spiritual service.

2. Matters concerning spiritual service.

To assist the poor, the sick, the dying, also means to think about their eternal salvation, to present them to our Father in heaven, as he wrote on 20 November 1644 to the Superior at Montmirail, Guillaume Delville, where there were sick amongst the households of the nobles:¹⁵

“Blessed be God that the nobility call for you when they are sick! This is a good work and the most effective means of cooperating in their salvation. If they recover, you are

¹⁴ CCD, XI, 308.

¹⁵ CCD, II, 545-546.

getting them to take the resolution to serve God better and to adopt a better manner of living; and if they die, you are placing them in the merciful hands of Our Lord. I earnestly desire that the same be done with the poor, as far as this is possible.”

Let us recall that beautiful expression, “put them into the merciful hands of Our Lord.”

The great aim of Monsieur Vincent was to instruct both clergy and faithful at the same time, especially in the countryside, greatly abandoned by the clergy, who preferred to live in towns; and to undertake ardent prayer for the salvation of the world, for all, for the conversion of sinners, and for the return of heretics to the Church.

His teaching was aimed at several groups: • at Christians, who already had some instruction and who were living good lives; • at sinners; • at the ignorant; and, • finally, at those who had been brought up in error, in heresy. ‘Heresy’ comes from the Greek “haïresis,” which means ‘choice.’ A heretic is very rarely entirely in error; what he believes is also taught by the Church, but he refuses to believe some part of what the Church teaches, and which is found in Holy Scripture.

With regard to those who were notorious sinners, called to appear before the tribunal, he wrote to Pierre Cabel, Superior in Sedan, on 28 December 1658, that it is better to ask indulgence of the judges for the criminal, even if it is the same act of intercession for those who are blameworthy and those who deserve mercy:¹⁶

“It is the distinctive duty of priests to procure mercy and to be merciful to criminals, so you must not always refuse to help those who seek your intervention, especially when there is more misfortune than malice in their crime ... you may do so whenever you see that the case merits it, and you can prepare the minds of the judges by telling them that it is not your intention to defend crime but rather to practice mercy, by seeking it for the guilty and demanding it for the innocent, according to the obligation of your state.”

Prayer for sinners is prayer for all, including suicides, as he wrote to Edme Jolly, Superior in Rome, to whom he replied on 4 April 1659:¹⁷

¹⁶ CCD, VII, 443.

¹⁷ CCD, VII, 498.

“May God be merciful to those deceased persons you mentioned to me, especially that wretched man who took his own life, if he had a few moments to repent.”

As for relationships with heretics, disciples of John Calvin, he speaks thus to Jean Martin on 23 May 1659, reminding him that, on the one hand, we must await the occasion and, on the other, await the outcome, all the while knowing that it does not depend on us:¹⁸

“The conversion of heretics and sinners alike is a result of the absolute mercy and omnipotence of God alone...”

One can thus undertake works of mercy by prayer alone, when one is sick, infirm, or enclosed; **praying not just for the conversion of sinners but for the sanctification of all**, as he wrote to Étienne Blatiron, Superior in Genoa, on 25 September 1648:¹⁹

“I am greatly consoled by His Eminence’s determination to put good order in the seminary by having them make retreats. I beg Our Lord to sanctify them by His holy mercy.”

Prayer does not spring from itself alone; it is simply a call to the mercy of God: it is not we who achieve it, it is God – but, all the same, he awaits our prayer. He reminds the Superior of Genoa, Etienne Blatiron, of this on 14 February 1648:²⁰

“The graces God is showering on your labors is the result of His pure mercy and not of our wretched prayers.”

Finally, in order that our prayer might be true, might penetrate our life, it is necessary to follow Jesus even to the very end. He has asked this of us, he who made real the salvation of humanity, by atoning for the sins of the world on the cross. We offer ourselves on the crosses that life sends our way.

That is how far we are called upon to follow him, for he has said; “if anyone wishes to follow me, let him take up his cross and follow me.”²¹

We can conclude with these words from Vincent to the Daughters of Charity, from 31 July 1634, eight months after their foundation, on their ‘Rules’:²²

¹⁸ CCD, VII, 583.

¹⁹ CCD, III, 367.

²⁰ CCD, III, 274-275.

²¹ Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23.

²² CCD, IX, 5.

“Remember that when you leave meditation and Holy Mass to serve poor persons, you lose nothing, Sisters, because to serve those who are poor is to go to God, and you should see God in them. So then, be very careful to attend to all their needs, and be particularly alert to the assistance you can give them for their salvation; don’t let them die without the sacraments. You’re not there simply to care for their bodies, but to help them to be saved. Above all, motivate them to make general confessions; put up with their little fits of temper, and encourage them to suffer patiently for the love of God. Never get angry with them, and don’t speak to them harshly; they have enough to put up with because of their illness. **Imagine that you’re their visible Guardian Angel, their father and mother, and don’t contradict them except in those things that are bad for them ... Weep with them; God has made you to be their consolers.**”

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The Value of Mercy in Saint Vincent de Paul

By: Paulino Sáez López, C.M.

When we go to visit poor persons, we have to sympathize with them in order to suffer with them, and put ourselves in the dispositions of that great Apostle, who said, “I have made myself all to all” (Cf. 1 Cor 9:22), so that the complaint Our Lord formerly made through one of the Prophets, “I waited to see if someone would sympathize with me in my sufferings, and there was none” (Cf. Ps 69:21) doesn’t fall on us. For that purpose, we have to try to stir our hearts to pity, make them sensitive to the sufferings and miseries of our neighbor, and ask God to give us the true spirit of mercy, which is the characteristic spirit of God; for, as the Church states, it’s the distinctive feature of God to be merciful and to impart his Spirit. So let’s ask God, my dear confreres, to give us this spirit of compassion and mercy, to fill us with it, and to preserve it in us so that whoever sees a Missioner can say, “There’s a man full of mercy.” Let’s reflect a little on how much we need mercy, since we have to practice it toward others and bring it to all sorts of places, and to suffer everything for its sake.¹

Vincent de Paul spoke those words during a conference on the spirit of mercy and compassion (6 August 1656), a conference in which he remembered the Missionaries in Poland and spoke about the manner in which they practiced those virtues.

Basing my reflections on the above-cited text, I will attempt to present the manner in which Vincent himself lived and practiced those virtues in his ministry.

The words, *mercy*, *compassion*, and *charity*, have much in common and are often used indistinctly as synonyms. We could distinguish certain differences among these words, but that would involve us in a science that is not strictly mathematical and therefore not very precise.

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. 308; 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:308.

Father Celestino Fernández, in his article on “the poor” in *Diccionario de espiritualidad vicenciana (Dictionary of Vincentian Spirituality)*, clarifies the concept: *mercy, in its most profound and authentic and etymological sense, is to have a heart that enables one to identify with those who suffer.*

We are not dealing with a simple sentiment of compassion, which can easily become sentimentalism. At the same time, mercy cannot be reduced to what are known as “the works of mercy,” which do not enable one to get to the causes of suffering and poverty. In fact, mercy is quite distinct from the alleviation of some sporadic and individual needs. Therefore, mercy is in no way related to any form of paternalism which often conceals injustice.

From the beginning, Vincent stated that there was no lack of charitable individuals but rather a lack in the organization of charitable activity. Vincent was not referring to some substitute for charity, but rather spoke about charity that cried out for justice. In a letter addressed to the superior in Marseilles (8 March 1658), Vincent stated: *God will grant you the grace, Monsieur, 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).*

Vincent de Paul did not invent mercy or compassion or charity. He did, however, embody the mercy, the compassion, and the charity of Jesus Christ and thus, made it a part of his everyday life.

The theology of Christ in this matter could be summarized with the following words: *I desire mercy, not sacrifice (Matthew 9:13).* Usually we, as human beings, prefer sacrifices. We prefer heart-moving rituals; but God requests mercy. Mercy is interior, something that flows from the heart. God does not want material sacrifices, but a love that struggles on behalf of justice and that never excuses itself with the words: *this is not my concern.*

If we reflect on the image of the father of the prodigal son we discover in his attitude the essence of mercy.

John Paul II, in his encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*, states: *This exact picture of the prodigal son's state of mind enables us to understand exactly what the mercy of God consists in. There is no doubt that in this simple but penetrating analogy the figure of the father reveals to us God as Father. The conduct of the father in the parable and his whole behavior, which manifests his internal attitude, enables us to rediscover the individual threads of the Old Testament vision of mercy in a synthesis*

which is totally new, full of simplicity and depth. The father of the prodigal son is faithful to his fatherhood, faithful to the love that he had always lavished on his son (# 6).

In this manner, then, *his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him* (Luke 15:20)

In our time, we understand charity as “promotion” and “development.” We work for justice so that charity will be unnecessary. Vincent expressed a similar idea when he stated: *obligations of justice have priority over those of charity* (CCD:VII:633).

Charity, then, should not be understood as compassion or some vague feeling, but rather as something that motivates us to act in love on behalf of another, to seek to help another. Compassion leads us to approach another, not to be like that person, but in order to relieve that person of the pain or suffering that he/she experiences. We extend a hand to that individual and fill him/her with hope, with the conviction that he/she is not alone. Those who are compassionate can never refuse help to someone who is suffering. Such help is provided in an authentic manner, in a manner that is free from sentimentality and from any desire to clear one’s conscience.

John Paul II, in the above-referenced encyclical, affirms: *Especially through His lifestyle and through His actions, Jesus revealed that love is present in the world in which we live – an effective love, a love that addresses itself to man and embraces everything that makes up his humanity. This love makes itself particularly noticed in contact with suffering, injustice and poverty – in contact with the whole historical “human condition,” which in various ways manifests man’s limitation and frailty, both physical and moral. It is precisely the mode and sphere in which love manifests itself that in biblical language is called “mercy”* (# 3).

In Vincent’s understanding of charity, mercy stands out more than any other element, and that element is palpable in the manner in which he treated other people. That mercy is more visible in those places where there is more suffering, more pain, and greater need. While others spoke theoretically about the poor, Vincent reached out to and sought the poor.

Here then we are dealing with an intelligent and critical charity. Thus, when Vincent counseled the Missionaries, it was obvious that he was concerned about justice, charity, and the good example that the

Missionaries ought to give: *we must be firm but not rough in our guidance, and avoid an insipid kind of meekness, which is ineffective* (CCD:IV:571).

People are as they are, not because they are Catholic or Protestant and, therefore, justice does not depend on an individual's beliefs. Vincent would say: *There is a great difference between being a Catholic and being just* (CCD:II:494).²

*When speaking about charitable activity Vincent made no distinction between Catholic or Protestant ... both might benefit in an equal manner from the distribution of alms. On several occasions, Vincent reminded the Missionaries about that reality as they engaged in the relief efforts in those areas that had been devastated by war.*³

Mercy, in the eyes of God, knows no limits, and if such mercy is like God's mercy, then, it is for everyone. Therefore, *it is the distinctive duty of priests to procure mercy and to be merciful to criminals, so you must not always refuse to help those who seek your intervention, especially when there is more misfortune than malice in their crime* (CCD:VII:443).

In this same line of thought we read in *Dives in Misericordia*, the following: *we must note that Christ, in revealing the love-mercy of God, at the same time demanded from people that they also should be guided in their lives by love and mercy. This requirement forms part of the very essence of the messianic message, and constitutes the heart of the Gospel ethos* (# 3).

It would be interesting to review the whole of paragraph # 4 of the Pope's encyclical (*Dives in Misericordia*) in which John Paul II analyzes the concept of mercy as it is used in the Old Testament. Mercy is always divine and is always expressed in terms of kindness toward human beings. Here, however, I have selected and will highlight just a few ideas: *The concept of "mercy" in the Old Testament has a long and rich history. We have to refer back to it in order that the mercy revealed by Christ may shine forth more clearly ... In the preaching of the prophets, mercy signifies a special power of love, which prevails over the sin and infidelity of the chosen people ... Both physical evil and moral evil,*

² Translator's Note: the official English translation of this text is as follows: *There is a great difference between being a Catholic and being an upright man.* I inserted in the text a literal translation of the Spanish (*hay mucha diferencia entre ser católico y ser justo*) which conveys the idea that the author is attempting to make.

³ The publication of the Proceedings at the 1982 Vincentian Studies Week, p. 68.

namely sin, cause the sons and daughters of Israel to turn to the Lord and beseech His mercy ... The Lord Himself triumphed over this act of breaking the covenant when He solemnly declared to Moses that He was a "God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" ... They foreshadow in the context of the Old Covenant the full revelation of God, who is "love" (*Dives in Misericordia*, # 4).

Vincent clearly understood that Christ identified himself with the poor. He read that in the 25th chapter of Saint Matthew's gospel. He meditated on those words and internalized them. If one wants to follow Christ and do what Christ did, then that individual can do nothing else but serve the poor. *And if we ask Our Lord, "What did you come to do on earth?" "To assist the poor." "Anything else?" "To assist the poor" (CCD:XI:98).*

John Paul II clarified the concept of "poor": *It is very significant that the people in question are especially the poor, those without means of subsistence, those deprived of their freedom, the blind who cannot see the beauty of creation, those living with broken hearts, or suffering from social injustice, and finally sinners. It is especially for these last that the Messiah becomes a particularly clear sign of God who is love, a sign of the Father. In this visible sign the people of our own time, just like the people then, can see the Father (Dives in Misericordia, # 3)*

To remain on a theoretical level would be the same as manifesting compassion without a commitment. Sentimentality has no value unless there is some form of action. Vincent was serious about mercy and therefore he did not remain on the level of contemplation, but moved into action. He understood the fact that the language that most directly touches the heart is the language of action: *I worry about our Company, but to tell you the truth, not so much as I do about the poor. If we need to, we could ask for help from our other houses or appeal to the vicars in the parishes. But where can the poor turn? ... This is my worry and my sorrow.*⁴

Vincent had seen too much suffering, too much ignorance. He had seen people suffer great hardship and he carried on his shoulders the

⁴ 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, vol. III, p. 117; future references to this work will be inserted in the text, for example, Abelly III:117.

weight of countless poor people whom he encountered. He did this in such a manner that it not only weighed upon him, but it caused him “worry and sorrow.” The poor, for Vincent, were a reality and not some figment of his imagination. They are poor people and they are not criminals; they are human beings and not garbage that has to be hauled outside the city in order to make the streets beautiful or in order to avoid presenting an offense to the eyes of the powerful.

All that Vincent encountered made him more concerned because every form of suffering touched him deeply and, ultimately, made him more merciful. Vincent was also a realist and in updating the Chinese proverb he wrote to Jean Parre and stated: *You are also asked to help the poor people to be able to earn their living in this season by supplying them with implements to gather in the harvest* (CCD:VIII:27).

Vincent went on to state: *They would also like to enable all the other poor people who have no land – men as well as women – to earn their own living, by giving the men some tools for working and the girls and women spinning wheels and flax or linen for spinning – but only the poorest ... As I told you, they have almost nothing definite so far but will make some effort as soon as you tell us approximately how much will be absolutely necessary for these three things: seeds, implements, and repairs* (CCD:VIII:82-83).

A large window surrounds the sanctuary of the community chapel in Cartagena. A flame rises from the tabernacle. On one side, in another window, Vincent is holding a child in his right arm and, with his other arm, he sustains and appears to be consoling an infirm individual. The heart in the center of the cross (red) that seems to cover his chest, receives the heat from the flame that arises from the tabernacle. The whole picture, in fact, is surrounded by flames. This is a dazzling presentation and the image appears to present one who is attempting to remedy (through the practice of charity) the various needs that he encounters during his journey. Vincent de Paul, aware of his mission in the world, became the Good Samaritan. But it would be irreverent if, as we spoke about Vincent as the Good Samaritan, we were to forget Saint Luke who presented us with one of the most unforgettable stories in the gospels. Unforgettable not only because of the compassion that is revealed by the Samaritan (which is the reason that he received the name “good”), but unforgettable also because the depth of the compassion of the Good Samaritan mirrors the compassion of the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son (that is, mirrors the compassion of the father of the two sons, one who took

his inheritance and left home, the other who remained at home). The father was moved to compassion for both of his sons and so also the Samaritan was moved to compassion when he saw the man lying on the side of the road.

Vincent de Paul shared in this compassion and was moved by the various needs that he confronted. Everything that Vincent encountered opened and broadened the horizons of his concern. Every form of suffering moved Vincent to compassion: *Mercy – as Christ has presented it in the parable of the prodigal son – has the interior form of the love that in the New Testament is called agape. This love is able to reach down to every prodigal son, to every human misery, and above all to every form of moral misery, to sin. When this happens, the person who is the object of mercy does not feel humiliated, but rather found again and “restored to value” (Dives in Misericordia, # 6).*

In the case of Vincent de Paul, the infirm family in Châtillon was the first recipient of his mercy and this resulted in the organization of the first Confraternity of Charity. Then, Vincent heard the cries of the poor country people, who lacked spiritual and material attention, and he attempted to resolve that situation by offering popular missions and by becoming involved in the formation of the clergy. Later, Vincent would encounter the galley slaves, abandoned children, the mentally ill, etc. Vincent would seek to provide assistance to the people who found themselves in those different situations: the Confraternities, the Congregation of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity, etc.

The fundamental question was that of continuing the mission of the Son of God, namely, that of evangelizing the poor; evangelization that involved an integral process which provided care for the whole person. In his conference on the purpose of the Congregation (6 December 1658), Vincent spoke to the Missionaries and stated: *If priests devote themselves to the care of the poor, wasn't that what Our Lord and many great saints did, and they not only recommended poor persons to others, but they themselves consoled, comforted, and healed them? Aren't those who are poor the afflicted members of Our Lord? Aren't they our brothers and sisters? And if priests abandon them, who do you think is going to help them? So then, if there are any among us who think they're in the Mission to evangelize poor people but not to alleviate their sufferings, to take care of their spiritual needs but not their temporal ones, I reply that we have to help them and have them assisted in every way, by us and by others, if we want to hear those pleasing words of the Sovereign Judge of the living and the dead, “Come, beloved of my*

Father; possess the kingdom that has been prepared for you, because I was hungry and you gave me to eat; I was naked and you clothed me; sick and you assisted me.” To do that is to preach the Gospel by words and by works, and that’s the most perfect way; it’s also what Our Lord did, and what those should do who represent Him on earth, officially and by nature, as priests do (CCD:XII:77-78).

A few months before his death, Vincent insisted on this idea when he wrote (7 February 1660) to Jacques de la Fosse in Troyes and stated: *Our little Company has given itself to God from the beginning to serve the poor corporally and spiritually; consequently, at the same time it has worked for the salvation of the poor through missions, it has also established a means of solacing the sick through the Confraternities of Charity (CCD:VIII:277).* Vincent continued to speak with him about the various ways in which the Congregation continued to serve the poor.

Mercy is an ever-present reality that has been proper to the Church of every era. In his unpublished work, *La nueva evangelización en Europa [The New Evangelization in Europe]*, Pablo Dominguez states: *The Church, when its hands are like those of Jesus, the servant, proclaims that she is willing to touch the leper and to wash the feet of the disciples ... in this way the Church proclaims, in an understandable manner, the mystery of salvation in Jesus Christ and thus, destroys preconceived and distorted visions of the Christian faith.*

Vincent, after deepening his understanding of the being and the activity of Jesus Christ, proposed an authentic following of Jesus Christ. This Christ, according to Father Pedro Opeka, a faithful follower of Saint Vincent, is *the humblest man on earth, a man who is close to his friends, who forgives seventy times seven, a man who is filled with love and compassion and mercy, who raises people up when they have fallen and fills them with joy and peace. Jesus always walks with the people, knocks at the door and never tires of doing so; he gives people strength so that they will not be afraid of anyone or anything; he did not hesitate to be a “fool” and die on the cross for all people. Jesus gives us the Holy Spirit and sends us forth throughout the world as the fishers of people ... he enables us to live for the cause of the Kingdom of God.*

In this regard, Father José Ignacio Fernández de Mendoza states: *This Christ is so close that he is imitable. People can clothe themselves in his sentiments and can continue to do what he did. How great are the poor! So great that the Son of God came in person into the midst of this*

world in order to evangelize them. The poor are a theological element and they reveal Christ.

As in every era, so also in the time of Vincent de Paul there were different opinions with regard to the poor. According to Henry Kamen: *there were two very distinct opinions with regard to the poor, opinions that were very common among the Christians of that era. One of noble, humanist, and Christian lineage that affirmed the fact that the poor deserved to be treated well by society, because it was society that had treated them badly. Another view, sustained by some Catholics but upheld mostly by Protestants, affirmed that the poor merited punishment, because it was their own inability that had placed them in the situation where they found themselves.*⁵

As reflected in his writings, Vincent shared the first view: *To be a Christian and to see our brother suffering without weeping with him, without being sick with him! That's to be lacking in charity; it's being a caricature of a Christian; it's inhuman; it's to be worse than animals* (CCD:XII:222). Vincent had learned the gospel lesson very well: *whatever you did for one of these least brothers or sisters of mine, you did for me* (Matthew 25:40). Thus, charity would become the most significant language in the process of evangelizing the poor. Now, when people think about Vincent de Paul, they also think about charity. It is clear, then, that as a result of the events that occurred at Châtillon, Vincent's charity not only became effective but he also became the great organizer of charity.

Vincent intended not only to feed the hungry (a most urgent need at that time), but also, and more importantly, intended to promote the dignity of those men and women who found themselves in a situation of poverty. Vincent was never indifferent toward anyone who was hungry and, in fact, he was incensed over the great number of hungry people who lived on the streets.

Vincent felt that it was necessary to know the reality of the poor, to see firsthand their material condition, and to understand and relate to them as one human being to another. Thus, the ministry of the Vincentians ought to promote changes in the life of those persons excluded from full participation in society; that is, they ought to promote the human dignity of the poor and promote that dignity on every level of society.

⁵ H. Kamen, *El siglo de hierro*, ed. Lecturalia, Madrid, 1977, p. 465.

Vincent did not accept (and could not accept) or resign himself to the fact that the situation of the poor was something natural. When confronted with a false charity, Vincent defended the dignity and the freedom of the poor. At the same time, Vincent did not opt to confront any one particular form of poverty over another, nor did he opt to minister on behalf of one particular group of poor people. Rather he ministered to every class of poor person and, in those places where he and his Missionaries were unable to go, there one could see the Daughters of Charity and the members of the various Confraternities of Charity ... *the poor do not know where to go and what do and their number and their suffering multiply by the day ... this is my worry and my concern.*

In his biography, Vicente de Dios states: *Vincent never criticized the poor but viewed them as victims and, therefore, not responsible for their situation of misery. Vincent often viewed those who ate well and lived well as responsible for the situation of the poor.*⁶

Pope John Paul II understood that the poor were Vincent's concern and worry, because he was merciful. In his homily of 27 September 1987, as he reflected on the beatitudes, the Pope stated: *Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy (Matthew 5:7)! Today we are gathered in this plaza, in front of the Basilica that has been built upon the tomb of Saint Peter in order to call to mind a man who, in an extraordinary manner, made this beatitude the foundation of his life and of his vocation: Saint Vincent de Paul!*⁷

We can see then that the poor are at the root of all the various Vincentian ministries and institutions. The poor constitute the reason for our being as Vincentians. Vincent, a practical man, did not allow himself to be deceived by appearances and so he wrote to Marc Coglée, the superior in Sedan (26 April 1651) and stated: *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 (CCD:IV:188).* In this manner Vincent promoted the poor, made others aware of their dignity and at

⁶ Vicente de Dios, *Biografía*, Mx., 1991, p. 257.

⁷ Translator's Note: The translation of that section from the Pope's homily is my own translation and not an official Vatican translation. On the website of the Vatican, this homily appears only in Italian and I do not have access to the English edition of *L'Osservatore Romano* for that particular year.

the same time made it clear that the poor themselves had to be the primary agents of their own development.

This same was stated at the Second Vatican Council: *The demands of justice must first of all be satisfied; that which is already due in justice is not to be offered as a gift of charity. The cause of evils, and not merely their effects, ought to disappear. The aid contributed should be organized in such a way that beneficiaries are gradually freed from their dependence on others and become self-supporting (Apostolicam Actuositatem, # 8).*

Mercy acquires its greatest expression in the incarnation of our Lord, Jesus Christ, who is not some spirit, but a man who eats and drinks: *by becoming for people a model of merciful love for others, Christ proclaims by His actions even more than by His words that call to mercy which is one of the essential elements of the Gospel ethos (Dives in Misericordia, # 3).*

The central focus of Vincent de Paul was Jesus Christ, but Jesus viewed from the perspective of the Word of God made man, Jesus Christ the human person, Jesus who traveled from town to town, Jesus the missionary, Jesus reaching out to the poor and the infirm and promoting their dignity. Those poor and infirm men and women, who were marginalized by society, were the persons with whom Jesus (in the gospel of Matthew) identifies himself and these poor and infirm men and women are the persons whom we must serve since, according to Saint Vincent, they are our lords and masters. *...let's ... seek out those who are the poorest and most abandoned; let's acknowledge before God that they're our lords and masters and that we're unworthy of rendering them our little services (CCD:XI:349).*

One, then, must serve the poor as a primary obligation. At one time, the following words of Saint Vincent to the Daughters of Charity may have sounded like a clever, but not very pious saying: *If the good pleasure of God were that you should go on a Sunday to nurse a sick person instead of going to Mass, even though that's a matter of obligation, you should do it. That's called leaving God for God (CCD:X:76).*

After listening to Saint Vincent, there can be little doubt about what we, as the Vincentian Family, ought to do and how we ought to do it. Our saint's realism ought to bring us to a spirituality that converts our tasks in favor of the poor into affective love, but also and above all, into effective love. *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; for very*

often many acts of love of God, of devotion, and of other similar affections and interior practices of a tender heart, although very good and desirable, are, nevertheless, very suspect if they don't translate into the practice of effective love ... We have to be very careful about that; for there are many who, recollected exteriorly, and filled with lofty sentiments of God interiorly, stop at that, and when it comes to the point of doing something, and they have the opportunity to act, they come up short. They flatter themselves with their ardent imagination; they're satisfied with the sweet conversations they have with God in meditation and even speak of them like angels; but when they leave there, if there's a question of working for God, of suffering, of mortifying themselves, of instructing poor persons, of going in search of the lost sheep, of being happy when they lack something, or of accepting sickness or some other misfortune, alas! they're no longer around; their courage fails them. No, no, let's not fool ourselves: Totum opus nostrum in operatione consistit (all our work consists in action) (CCD:XI:32-33).

In these words we find that, when confronted with the situation of the poor, we cannot remain content with a private and theoretical spirituality, but rather the very spirituality of Saint Vincent himself impels us to action: *Let's ... seek out those who are the poorest and most abandoned; let's acknowledge before God that they're our lords and masters and that we're unworthy of rendering them our little services (CCD:XI:349).*

Vincent de Paul's faith and experience in the service of the poor, manifested through a lively contact with them, is embodied in three Institutions: *the Ladies of Charity or Charities (today called the AIC), the Congregation of the Mission, and the Company of the Daughters of Charity.*

It is usually thought that religious communities, with their aspect of denunciation, arise as a prophetic contribution, seeking to change situations that are inconsistent with the gospel at a particular time. Later on they begin to lose the first fervor just as stated in the book of Revelation when the author addresses the church at Ephesus. Confining structures begin to appear and protective walls are erected. Fear of risk and fear of the future arise.

This may have come later on; it was not that way at first.

In the year 1617 the Vincent de Paul of the mission and of charity is born. It is necessary to organize the Mission and the Charities. Both goals are fulfilled in the years 1617, 1625, and 1633 with the

foundation of the Charities, of the Congregation of the Mission, and the Daughters of Charity.

In 1617, by a providential occurrence, a sick family of Châtillon, without food or care, touches the heart of the one man who could transmit the word to all the parishioners so they could aid those who needed aid. But he realizes right away that it will be necessary to prolong this overly long procession of momentary charity, without letting that first fervor grow cold.

And so on 23 August 1617, he brings together a group of pious women of the town and encourages them to form an association to aid the sick poor of the town (CCD:XIIIb:3-5). The Associations of Charity were born.

José María Román will say: *It was thanks to the charities that the Church could be a mother to the destitute. At a time when women were regarded as nothing more than men's servants or, worse still, as instruments of the devil, Vincent de Paul gave them pride of place in the noblest work of the Church, the proclamation of charity.*⁸

As time passed it would be these women, not without social and moral reluctance, who, together with the Daughters of Charity, would care for the abandoned children: *Well then, Ladies, compassion and charity have led you to adopt these little creatures as your own children; you have been their mothers according to grace since the time their mothers according to nature abandoned them. See now whether you, too, want to abandon them. Stop being their mothers to be their judges at present; their life and death are in your hands. I'm going to take the vote; it's time to pass sentence on them and to find out whether you are no longer willing to have pity on them. If you continue to take charitable care of them, they will live; if, on the contrary, you abandon them, they will most certainly perish and die; experience does not allow you to doubt that* (CCD:XIIIb:423-424).

This very dramatic scene portrayed in the film about Saint Vincent is so beautifully depicted in the script of Jean Anouilh.

The year 1617 will also see the affective birth of another of the institutions of Saint Vincent after the confession of the peasant in Gannes: the Congregation of the Mission. If everything began at Châtillon, the experience at Folleville was no less fruitful. The problem

⁸ J. M. Román, *St Vincent de Paul: A Biography*, translated by Sr. Joyce Howard, DC, Melisende, London, 1999; p. 445.

of the dying old man makes Vincent feel the need to preach the gospel to those country folk who, moved and grateful, came in great numbers to make their general confession. Besides his word, Vincent has his ardent compassion for those abandoned brothers of his: *That took place in the month of January 1617, and, on the twenty-fifth, the feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul, that lady asked me to preach a sermon in the church of Folleville to urge the people to make a general confession, which I did, pointing out to them its importance and usefulness. Then I taught them how to make it properly ... That was the first sermon of the Mission* (CCD:XI:3-4). That day, 25 January 1617, will be considered as the emotional beginning of the Congregation.

Charity towards the poor turns those who practice it into true servants, into servants of the poor who, in their turn, become their “lords and masters.” Saint Vincent would say to the missionaries: *Come then, my dear confreres, let’s devote ourselves with renewed love to serve persons who are poor and even seek out those who are the poorest and most abandoned; let’s acknowledge before God that they’re our lords and masters and that we’re unworthy of rendering them our little services* (CCD:XI:349).

These are the factors that brought about the birth of the various works of Saint Vincent, all of them in the service of the poor. Both material and spiritual service. He communicates this same thing in a letter to Mother Chantal in 1639: *And because you wish to know what constitutes our humble way of life, I shall tell you then, most worthy Mother, that our Little Company is established to go from village to village at its own expense, preaching, catechizing, and having the poor people make general confessions of their entire past life. We try to settle the disagreements we find among them and do all we can to see that the sick poor are assisted corporally and spiritually by the Confraternity of the Charity, composed of women, which we set up in the places where we give the mission and which desire it. To this work, which is our principal one, and in order to perform it better, the Providence of God has added that of taking into our houses ten days before ordination those who are to take orders. We feed and support them and during that time teach them practical Theology, the ceremonies of the Church, and how to make and practice mental prayer according to the method of our blessed Father, the Bishop of Geneva. We do this for those who belong to the diocese in which we are established* CCD:I:553).

Even though, as we have just seen, he thought in principle primarily of the country poor, the war brought fundamental changes; his heart did not stop feeling and he needed to attend to those who had sought refuge in the city. Thus he writes to Father Lambert Aux Couteaux in June of 1652: *We are unable to go and give missions in the rural areas because the poor people are so scattered – some here; some there, driven from their homes by fear of being mistreated by the soldiers – so we have decided to give them to the people who have taken refuge in Paris. We began today in our own church, with eight hundred of those poor persons living in these faubourgs, and we will go to the others next. One of our men has also gone to open the mission for the refugees at Saint Nicolas-du-Chardonnet* (CCD:IV:398-399).

We are now in the year 1633. Saint Louise and Saint Vincent had already begun to work together some years previously. Both of them, twins in their feelings of mercy, are going to continue to work together on behalf of the poor for a long time.

Some of the Ladies of Charity, after their initial enthusiasm and not used to service and hard work, began to delegate the attention to the poor to their servants. This did not please Vincent, who wanted complete dedication. Providence responded to his desire: *Then a simple young woman from the country, named Marguerite Naseau (1594-1633), presented herself to perform the menial tasks which the ladies of the confraternities were unable to assume. Inspired by true evangelical love, she became the servant of the most abandoned.*⁹

That same year several young women joined together to form community under the guidance of Saint Louise. In this way the Company of the Daughters of Charity was born, with a permanent vocation of service to the poor, which is what Saint Vincent truly wanted.

He himself explains: *“But because the ladies who make up the Confraternity belong, for the most part, to a social class that does not allow them to perform the most menial and abject services proper to the work of this Confraternity, such as carrying the soup pot through the city, doing the bleedings, preparing and giving enemas, dressing wounds, making beds and watching at night over the sick who are alone and near death, they have taken some good country girls to whom God had given*

⁹ *Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity*, “The Daughters of Charity according to the Spirit of the Founders,” p. 18.

the desire to assist the sick poor, who attend to all these little services, after having been trained for this purpose by a virtuous widow ... And what is still more noteworthy in the work of these poor girls is that, besides the corporal services they render to the sick poor, they try to contribute to their spiritual welfare, as best they can (CCD:II:600, 602).

These young women, as we know, were very clear about what they wanted and what they were supposed to do to be faithful to their vocation. They told Saint Vincent that assisting a person who had no need was not mercy. Saint Vincent was surprised by some of the answers of these Sisters and he made them his own in so far as they were rooted in fidelity to their vocation. *Yesterday, because I was being hard pressed by Madame de Combalet to send her the Sister, and since it was for her, I spoke to Marie Denyse about it. She seemed to me better suited for the situation, but she gave me an answer worthy of a girl with a vocation from God to the Charity, which was that she had left her father and mother to give herself to the service of the poor for the love of God, and she begged me to excuse her if she could not change her intention in order to go and serve that great lady (CCD:I:321-322)*

From 1632, when he is established in Saint-Lazare, his charity broadens its scope and takes on new needs and, from the founding of the Company, the Daughters of Charity have been relieving all the needs they came across – every kind of misery: *abandoned children, galley slaves, beggars*. And these were not the only ones they attended. Poverty had another thousand faces. It is typical of Saint Vincent's charity to recognize them all and not neglect any of them either by himself or through his institutions.

His concern to solve the problem of the *formation of the clergy* was no less strong. Ever since Madame de Gondi alerted him to the ignorance of the clergy, a shadow came over his face because “*a community is what its priest is.*” In a repetition of prayer on 25 January 1655 about the origins of the Congregation, he reminded the missionaries: *one day, when the late Lady went to make her confession to her Pastor, she noted that he didn't give her absolution; he mumbled something between his teeth and did the same at other times when she went to confession to him ... When she told me this, I was on the alert and paid special attention to the priests to whom I made my confession. I found that this was indeed true and that some of them didn't know the words of absolution (CCD:XI:163).*

First came the retreats for ordinands, which began on 17 September 1628, and Saint Vincent considered them as “*the richest and most precious deposit the church could put in our hands.*”¹⁰

Afterwards, from the year 1633, he has in his hands a tool, which will represent an important advance in this journey: the Tuesday Conferences.

Finally, the concern for the clergy takes on new forms with the foundation of seminaries starting in 1635.

The galley slaves were for Saint Vincent another of the innumerable types of poor people who should be helped since none of them could be excluded from Christian charity. And so he will say to the missionaries that it was a matter of another way of attending to the needy.

He urges the Daughters of Charity to serve the poor prisoners whom he has seen being treated like beasts. Therefore, from the pen of Saint Vincent, this terrible institution is invested with humanity and with concrete and hurting human faces. “*Vincent was just as concerned with the spiritual welfare of the galley slaves as he was with their material welfare. He visited the gaols and showed great zeal in preaching missionary style to these people who were as distanced from God as they were abandoned by men. His success was beyond all expectation.*”¹¹

Turning to our theme, **mercy is the overarching cause** of all Saint Vincent de Paul’s works of charity. He has allowed himself to incarnate the spirit of Jesus Christ and he has incarnated this spirit in everything he did. And so his activity reverts to what the Son did in the name of the Father to show how God is the Father, a good father, full of mercy, who is moved to the depths before all his children.

For his children, the poor, Vincent de Paul is capable of anything, going so far as to confront the most powerful people with no concern for what may happen.

Anyone who approaches, even superficially, the life of Vincent de Paul, will find himself with an enormous number of risky actions, prophetic denunciations, commitment to justice, attitudes, and words aimed at impeding, by all the means he has at hand, that society continue to fabricate more poor people. Because of its degree of risk, his interview with Prime Minister Richelieu to ask him openly to stop

¹⁰ J. M. Román, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

¹¹ J. M. Román, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

the war stands out; as does his public and radical opposition to the political exploitation of the country people designed by Cardinal Mazarin: *throw yourself into the sea to appease the storm.*¹²

From all that we have said, we can affirm that Saint Vincent continues to be very relevant. Pope John Paul II says: “The genuine face of mercy has to be ever revealed anew. In spite of many prejudices, mercy seems particularly necessary for our times” (*Dives in Misericordia* # 6).

From the present day, these documents speak to us of the relevance of Saint Vincent; they are like an echo of the text proposed for our reflection. On 7 December 1965, in the allocution pronounced by Pope Paul VI at the closing of the II Vatican Council, he said among other things: *Consequently, if we remember, venerable brothers and all of you, our children, gathered here, how in everyone we can and must recognize the countenance of Christ (cf. Matt. 25:40), the Son of Man, especially when tears and sorrows make it plain to see, and if we can and must recognize in Christ’s countenance the countenance of our heavenly Father “He who sees me,” Our Lord said, “sees also the Father” (John 14:9), our humanism becomes Christianity, our Christianity becomes centered on God; in such sort that we may say, to put it differently: a knowledge of man is a prerequisite for a knowledge of God.*¹³

These words of Pope Paul VI openly confirm the relevance of our saint, as he might have been in Vatican Council II or as he might have inspired part of that council. Saint Vincent bases on the very text of Matthew 25 his attitude towards the poor. In them he sees the face of Christ and he treats the poor as he would treat Christ.

Saint Vincent, his heart full of mercy, will say that the poor are: *“people, images of God, our brothers, sorrowing and distinguished members of the body of Christ, recipients and principal repositories of the gospel, those who introduce us into the Kingdom of God, incarnation and representation of Jesus Christ, easers of conscience at the hour of death, intercessors in heaven, our lords and masters.”*¹⁴

¹² P. Coste, *The Life and Work of Saint Vincent de Paul*, 3 volumes, translated from the French by Joseph Leonard, C.M., The Newman Press, Westminster, Maryland, 1952; volume II, p. 448.

¹³ Paul VI, “Address of Pope Paul VI during the Last General Meeting of the Second Vatican Council.”

¹⁴ A. Orcajo, *El seguimiento de Jesús según Vicente de Paul*, Ed. La Milagrosa, Madrid, 1990, p. 77.

Let us add to these ideas those of Pope Benedict XVI; in his message on the World Day of the Sick in 2011, he affirmed: “*If every man is our brother, much more must the sick, the suffering and those in need of care be, at the centre of our attention, so that none of them feels forgotten or emarginated.*” And quoting himself, in the same document he reminds us of no. 38 of his second encyclical *Spe Salvi*, where it says: “*The true measure of humanity is essentially determined in relationship to suffering and to the sufferer. This holds true both for the individual and for society. A society unable to accept its suffering members and incapable of helping to share their suffering and to bear it inwardly through “com-compassion” is a cruel and inhuman society*” ... *Indeed, to accept the “other” who suffers, means that I take up his suffering in such a way that it becomes mine also.*”¹⁵

To those of us accustomed to Saint Vincent’s language, these texts of Paul VI and Benedict XVI are nothing new. They are a confirmation that the concerns of Saint Vincent in his time continue to be the same in our time, which verifies that, moving through time, the ideas of Saint Vincent are absolutely valid for our days. We should not forget the words of our Lord: “*The poor you will always have with you.*”¹⁶

Summing up, if we are beside a person in misery, as Vincentians, we cannot respond with true mercy to the needs of the poor, unless we have first penetrated into the mechanisms that produce the poverty, the marginalization, and the exclusion, if we do attempt to make disappear the “structures of sin” or its “evil mechanisms.”¹⁷

Let us leave open the doorway of hope because, paraphrasing Father José María Román in the last paragraph of his work “*St Vincent de Paul: A Biography*,” there are very many people who today work and struggle in the church to keep Saint Vincent’s spirit alive.

Translated: Joseph Cummins, C.M. and Charles Plock, C.M.

¹⁵ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, # 38.

¹⁶ Matthew 26:11.

¹⁷ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, # 40.

Mercy as Part of Our Being as Vincentians

By: Andrés R. M. Motto, C.M.

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.

Translated: Charles T. Plock, C.M.

Vincentian Mercy

By: Benito Martínez, C.M.

A heartless society

On 11 April 2015, Pope Francis published the Bull, *Misericordiae Vultus*, and promulgated an Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, which began on 8 December 2015 and will conclude on 20 November 2016. The Pope stated: *How much I desire that the year to come will be steeped in mercy, so that we can go out to every man and woman, bringing the goodness and tenderness of God* (*Misericordiae Vultus*, #5). There is such a great need for mercy!

The hearts of many men and women are blocked. They are heartless individuals, inhuman persons who are indifferent to the sufferings of others in a society where only the strong triumph. Technology, efficiency, and bureaucracy have destroyed tenderness. In today's society, to be compassionate toward those who suffer appears as a sign of disrespect toward those suffering, unworthy of strong and enterprising individuals in a competitive society where, as I have just stated, only the strong triumph. This society is unable to provide work to everyone who desires such work and thus, society has become a stage that forms people to overcome difficulties but does not form men and women to be compassionate with those who are lost. In fact, the lost are viewed as rivals. We have forgotten how to express our feelings and we are embarrassed if people should see us cry. The Roman adage has become a reality: *homo homini lupus* (man is a wolf to his fellow men).

If the baptized have an obligation to reveal the face of Christ in such a way that each believer will manifest certain characteristics, and do so according to their psychological disposition and the vocation to which they have been called, then Vincentians have an even greater obligation to reveal mercy to the world, to "give a heart" to the gears of modern life, and, individually and as a community, to reach out to those individuals who suffer. During this year, which Pope Francis has dedicated to mercy, the followers of Vincent de Paul and Frédéric

Ozanam ought to focus on that trait which Pope John Paul II placed before the Superioress General, Sister Juana Elizondo, when he stated that *[your] vocation is to be the face of the love and mercy of Christ.*¹ Vincent de Paul spoke to the Sisters about the same concept.² These are very insightful words since Vincentians are being told not simply to serve and evangelize those who are poor, but to express to them Jesus's love and mercy.

For centuries, the world has been governed by reason. Now it is time that it be guided by the heart and by mercy. Reason is an admirable faculty, considered to be the root of all progress. Whoever uses it for the good of society attains well-being. In reality, the mind and the heart need each other. In order that our aid be effective, Vincentians need to be able to discern and organize. Saint Vincent discovered this first of all in 1617 in Folleville, when he took up the idea of Madame de Gondi on the need to institute a stable group of missionaries to evangelize the poor of the society living in the country towns at that time (CCD:XI:2-4). The same thing happened in Châtillon when he reflected on the poorly organized help so many people were giving to a poor family; he deduced that charity ought to be organized in *groups composed solely of women* who should be *autonomous*, but not independent, and he founded the first Charity.

In the same way, Vincent used his reason to reform the clergy. He began with the Exercises for ordinands, moved on to the ongoing formation of the clergy with the Tuesday Conferences, and ended up by taking on the work of seminaries as an important ministry of the Congregation.³

Vincent wrote to M. Bernard Codoing: *such is my belief and such is my experience* (CCD:II:316); that is, he was guided by faith and by reason. Reason and faith told him that *the obligations of justice have priority over those of charity* (CCD:VII:633), that *the greatest slight that can be given to love is to give in charity what should be given in justice*,

¹ To Reverend Mother Juana Elizondo, *Echo*, 1997, #6-7, p. 305.

² *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 X, p. 268; 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:X:268.

³ I explained how Saint Vincent used his mind in the foundations and institutions he set up in a Vincentian Week in Salamanca ("St. Vincent de Paul, a discernor of spirits" in *The Spiritual Experience of St. Vincent de Paul. Week 35 of Vincentian Studies*, CEME, Salamanca 2010, pp. 187-223).

and that *there is no act of charity that is not accompanied by justice* (CCD:II:68). Furthermore the saint insisted with firmness and clarity: “*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).

Reason told him that the Daughters of Charity, as well as the Missionaries, have to care for the total person, soul and body, corporally and spiritually (CCD:VIII:277; XII:77). He used his reason to understand that one must begin by giving them the necessary means: tools, seed, materials, etc. so that they themselves can make the effort to move out of their poverty (CCD:IV:188; VIII:27, 82-83).

Nevertheless, in relating to the poor he preferred the heart, going down in history as the symbol of mercy, charity, and cordiality.

Mercy and Compassion

Pope Francis, when he convoked the Jubilee Year of Mercy (*Misericordiae Vultus*, #9) presented God as the *compassionate and merciful God, slow to anger and rich in mercy and fidelity* (Exodus 34:6), who *sent his Son to the world* to tell us in parables and cures and the reception he gave to sinners that *he wants mercy and not sacrifice* (Matthew 9:13, 12:7), going so far as to exclaim *Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy* (Matthew 5:7). When John the Baptist wants to find out if Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus shows him the works of mercy (Luke 7:22). For this reason, the encyclical, *Rich in Mercy*, affirms that *to believe in God is to believe in his mercy* (n. 8).

Mercy means having heart in the face of the suffering of others, as seen in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:33-37) and in Vincent’s cry: “the poor are my burden and my sorrow” which led him to exclaim “by the very heart of Jesus Christ.”⁴

Mercy is a mountain with two aspects: on one side is compassion and on the other forgiveness, and we call cordiality the greenery that beautifies it. But we refer to a compassion without limits: “be compassionate as your heavenly Father is compassionate,” and an unconditional pardon “up to seventy times seven.”⁵ Compassion is the

⁴ It is not the same expression as “by the mercy of Jesus Christ,” which Vincent used hundreds of times, which only means what we would say today with the expression “by the grace of God.”

⁵ Luke 6:36, Matthew 18:22; John 3:16. Cf. Galatians 4:4; Ephesians 2:4; Matthew 9:13; 12:7; Luke 7:22.

root and mercy is the fruit, while cordiality is the beauty with which the Vincentian presents himself. For its part, pardon is the machine which opens the way for the three virtues.

Neither mercy nor compassion take away pain or sorrow, but they act like a balm and encourage one to struggle against evil by means of charity. Charity is more divine; compassion humbler. Compassion is a love lower than charity since it only awakens in the face of pain, but it is more accessible. Whoever does not love the person he sees suffering, only with difficulty will he love the one he sees triumphing; but both remain blurry, without cordiality or warmth. Without mercy we would live more comfortably and without charity more indifferently. But we would have killed our hearts and we would be neither Vincentians nor Christians (see, *Misericordiae Vultus*, #11).

Vincent used to say, *mercy is the distinctive feature of God* (CCD:XI:328), and he would urge (his followers): *When we go to visit poor persons, we have to sympathize with them in order to suffer with them, and put ourselves in the dispositions of that great Apostle, who said, "I have made myself all to all" (1 Corinthians 9:22), so that the complaint Our Lord formerly made through one of the Prophets, "I waited to see if someone would sympathize with me in my sufferings, and there was none" (Psalm 69:21) doesn't fall on us. For that purpose, we have to try to stir our hearts to pity, make them sensitive to the sufferings and miseries of our neighbor, and ask God to give us the true spirit of mercy, which is the characteristic spirit of God; for, as the Church states, it's the distinctive feature of God to be merciful and to impart His Spirit. So let's ask God, my dear confreres, to give us this spirit of compassion and mercy, to fill us with it, and to preserve it in us so that whoever sees a Missioner can say, "There's a man full of mercy." Let's reflect a little on how much we need mercy, since we have to practice it toward others and bring it to all sorts of places, and to suffer everything for its sake* (CCD:XI:308). We should explain that, *since the Son of God was unable to have feelings of compassion in the state of His glory, which He possesses from all eternity in heaven, He willed to become man and to be our High Priest in order to share our sufferings. To reign with Him in heaven, we must, like Him, commiserate with His members on earth.* (CCD:XI:69).

Mercy does not demand that the one who feels pity should suffer. Jesus, at the Last Supper, poured out his sadness, but he consoled and encouraged his disciples. Saint Louise felt all kinds of sufferings *from her very birth* and she begged Saint Vincent to help her, but she never

asked that others suffer with her, although she always wanted to find a compassionate and cordial person.⁶ Suffering is evil and one must flee from pain, unless it is to share someone else's pain and ease his/her suffering. Compassion takes on part of the pain of the one who suffers so that that person may suffer less, feeling that he is not alone and has a friend who shares his pains, looks for solutions and fills him with hope.

It is true that compassion is a human feeling that is either felt or not felt; it cannot be called forth. But it can be channeled toward divine charity. Abelly tells us that, saddened by the bad weather at harvest time, Saint Vincent said to a friend: *I worry about our Company, but to tell you the truth, not so much as I do about the poor. If we need to, we could ask for help from our other houses or appeal to the vicars in the parishes. But where can the poor turn? Where can they go? This is my worry and my sorrow.*⁷ And he made it more concrete: *If this good woman does not take the farm, we will have to help her, for I have great sympathy for her. Give her one écu a month for a while, whether she wants to stay with her son or go to Montmirail, either to the Daughters or some other house* (CCD:V:437).

Pardon

The way to show sincere affection begins with pardon. Jesus teaches this as a condition for living together in the Sermon on the Mount and in the discourse in Chapter 18 of Matthew's gospel. Saint Paul had it in mind when he wanted to correct the divisions in the Church at Corinth and he wrote them the second letter. And it is one of the counsels Saint Vincent wrote to a community of Daughters of Charity that was divided: *The third [means] is for all of you to embrace one another ... ask pardon of one another....* (CCD:III:184).

But, what is pardon? Pardon does not suppose that one consider a fault as not committed or non-existent; what has been done, is done.

⁶ Cf. Louise de Marillac, *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac*, Edited and Translated from the French by Sister Louise Sullivan, DC, New City Press, Brooklyn, New York, 1991, p. 122-123 [L.113], p. 251 [L.88], p. 710-711 [A.29]; future references to this work will be inserted into the text using the initials [SWLM] followed by the page number, followed by the number of the letter or the number of the writing and/or manuscript, for example, SWLM:122-123 [L.113].

⁷ 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, vol. III, p. 117.

Neither is pardon just forgetting. Sometimes we will be able to forget and other times we may have to struggle to forget. There will also be times when it is impossible for us to wipe the past from our memory. Punishment, then, is not at odds with pardon. Punishment can be justified as education or correction that is useful either publicly or privately. Rancor or resentment is what can never be justified. *Pardon comes from the heart; it is ceasing to hate, abandoning rancor, resentment, vengeance, or the desire to punish.*

Pardon is understanding

In order to forgive, it is necessary to understand. If one understands that we all have defects, that we all fall, one is already forgiving (*Let him who has no sin cast the first stone* [John 8:1-11]). If one understands that the other is as he is and accepts him, one is already forgiving, even though one must condemn his behavior. Mercy is founded on humility. Vincentians can never forget that the *recognition of our own limitations and faults* aids the feelings of mercy and forgiveness. It is the attitude Jesus prescribes on the Mountain: that we do not judge nor look at the splinter in the eye of the other (Matthew 7:1-5). Understanding opens the way to examine the circumstances in others' lives. One almost does not need pardon: whoever understands does not judge; and if one does not judge, he does not consider said individual guilty. He pardons the other. In community life as well, we need to be understanding. Things that are tolerable for some are unbearable for others. We can read a model of compassion in the letters Saint Vincent wrote to Saint Louise when her aunt and uncle suffered misfortune (CCD:I:147, 150, 155, 156-157).

One must forgive, as Christ did on the cross, even the person who does not repent. For pardon is a gift offered gratuitously to the offender out of mercy for him, not an exchange of forgiveness for repentance. Pardon is unconditional, with no personal gain; otherwise, it is not pardon. Pardon must be considered in relation not just to the offender, but also in relation to the one who pardons.

It is the mentality Saint Vincent had in reference to the galley slaves: *It is the distinctive duty of priests to procure mercy and to be merciful to criminals, so you must not always refuse to help those who seek your intervention, especially when there is more misfortune than malice in their crime. There is a letter in Saint Augustine on this topic (I forget which one it is), which points out that to free sinners and prisoners by way of intervention and leniency is not promoting or condoning vice; it*

also points out that it is part of the propriety and charity of priests to plead for them. Therefore, you may do so whenever you see that the case merits it, and you can prepare the minds of the judges by telling them that it is not your intention to defend crime but rather to practice mercy, by seeking it for the guilty and demanding it for the innocent, according to the obligation of your state (CCD:VII:443). He says something similar to the Daughters of Charity: *Who takes pity on those poor criminals, abandoned by everyone? The poor Daughters of Charity. Isn't that doing what we've said: to honor the great charity of Our Lord, who assisted all the most wretched sinners, without taking their crimes into consideration? (CCD:X:93). 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 (CCD:X:103).*

Christian love is always in relation to forgiveness: the more one loves, the more he pardons; and the more one feels pardoned, the more he loves (Luke 7:47). Human forgiveness can serve as love, when this love seems impossible for us; at the same time as it prepares us to love. We must always be aware that pardon is on a lower level compared with love, but it is essential for living together. That person you find difficult to love, at least begin by pardoning him.

Compassionate cordiality

Frequently society preserves certain civil relationships that are referred to as manifestations of education. Manners and cordiality are demanded of good officials. Present-day society wants cordiality if it is a manifestation of education, but is disturbed if such cordiality is a manifestation of compassion. Such displays are often referred to as paternalism. Nevertheless, cordiality in the family and in community is like the silk and velvet that is used to cover walls or chairs in order to soften the edges and lower the noise.

Compassion is a sentiment that springs forth from human beings and forgiveness is a virtue that is acquired as the result of a struggle, but cordiality flows naturally from the heart and is an art that ought to be learned and should not be confused with feigned or forced affability. When individuals learn cordiality as an art, and nothing

more, they can be educated, but to be Christian, to be Vincentian, requires that such individuals possess cordiality as a virtue.

Family life, community life, and life in society are, in fact, composed of a network of personal relationships, men and women who meet and greet one another face to face. If cordiality does not fill that air that people breathe, then coldness and chill prevails and people become alienated from one another. On the other hand, if cordiality arises from the hearts of people and is expressed in their facial expressions and their gestures, then human relationships become more familiar and people become united with one heart. Cordiality is the face that expresses love. Saint Vincent stated: we should be *the first to show respect to the other. Why? Because otherwise it seems that we're avoiding one another, acting the gentleman or the nobleman, or being aloof. This closes a person's heart, whereas the contrary opens and expands it. Humility is a genuine effect of charity; when we meet someone, it causes us to be the first to show the person honor and respect and, by means of this, wins his affection* (CCD:XII:223). Humility enables us to view the poor as *our lords and masters*⁸ and thus we see ourselves as their servants. This was a proper and necessary expression during the 17th century and useful today if we also understand the need to be at the service of those who are poor, to be helpful to them because they are our friends. With this understanding, we affirm their dignity and promote their future. Friendship creates mutual cordiality.

We must reveal such cordiality not only with those who are poor, but among those who are poor: *Do you love the poor? Then you'll show them that you're glad to see them. If a Sister has love for her Sister, she expresses it in words ... so it's important for you to show this to one another by a certain joy that you have in your heart and that appears on your face ... when a Sister approaches you, let your friendship for her be seen from your expression that you're pleased to see her ... That's called cordiality, and it is an effect of charity, you see; so that, if charity were an apple, cordiality would be its color ... We might also say that, if charity were a tree, cordiality would be its leaves and fruit; if it were a*

⁸ *Signori e padroni* was a common phrase that indicated total possession of something or total domain over someone, something similar to our phrase, "they became lords and masters of the house." This phrase, however, was especially used when referring to "the Lords of a town" or of some particular place or "the Lords of the hospital." It was in this sense that Saint Vincent used the phrase (cf. CCD:IX:97; X:215, 268); Louise de Marillac only used the word *Maitres dueños/lords* (SWLM:12 [L.143], 36 [L.426] and many other references.

fire, cordiality would be the flame (CCD:X:390-391). Such expressions can be manifested by an embrace at the time of departure, a smile toward someone who may have offended us, a loving question addressed to someone who is suffering, interrupting what we are doing in order to make eye contact with someone who asks us a question will unite us more closely than expressing our ideas.

Mercy has been clothed with tenderness. It is the light and the fresh air that makes our relationships with another pleasing. Mercy without cordiality contaminates the air and eventually chokes us. Mercy must be clothed with cordiality in order not to offend the sensitivities of those who suffer. It is the garment of choice for Vincentians (cf. *Misericordiae Vultus*, #10).

The poverty of fear

At the present time, compassion is shown mostly to those persons who are afraid and who are part of the vast multitude of persons who experience the poverty of fear. Fear of soldiers, of epidemics and bad harvests were the expressions of poverty that characterized the poor of the 17th century. Today, the poor men and women of our society experience fear. Parents are fearful with regard to the future of their children, drugs, HIV, sexual abuse. Children are fearful of being bullied; the elderly fear loneliness; women are afraid of their former spouse or partner and seek an escort so as not to travel alone. Middle class workers are afraid of losing their job, which would result in being unable to provide for their family; while young people are afraid of not being able to find satisfying work. They view the future with uncertainty and do not know if their studies and preparation will enable them to obtain employment in their desired field. They are also aware of the fact that people succeed because they have a relationship with some politically or financially well-connected “godfather” or because their own family has influence. The poor remain marginalized and no one is compassionate toward them and, more recently, the poor have become fearful of radical Islamic jihadists.

Vincentians must reach out to the above-described poor. Yes, in imitation of Saint Vincent, we should say that the poor are *our worry and our sorrow* (Abelly III:117). True Vincentians will embrace and take on the sufferings of the poor as their own. Today there is an urgency to struggle against the fear that is experienced by those who are poor and this is not difficult. This is not difficult because of the changes that have occurred in our society: various institutions serve

the poor and labor unions and labor law defend the rights of workers. At the same, many wise Vincentians have stated, in one way or another, that the best possible manner to assist the poor is to instill in them hope and confidence as they struggle with their fear. Here we refer to the same trust and confidence that Jesus asked of his disciples when the boat in which he and the apostles were was battered about by a storm. When Jesus was awakened, he encouraged the Apostles: *Why are you terrified? Do you not yet have faith?* (Mark 4:40).

Translated: Joseph Cummins, C.M. and Charles T. Plock, C.M.

God's Mercy and the Vincentian Charism

By: Mario Di Carlo, C.M.

1. General elements with regard to mercy

Here we refer to those elements that will enable us to question our Vincentian experience. If *mercy* is God's proper name, then we must place ourselves before mercy with an attitude of contemplation: wonder and awe at being surprised by the irruption of God into our lives. Other essential attitudes then follow: celebration, proclamation, invocation, living in a way that enables one to be a witness of mercy, as well as a servant of mercy (mindful, above all else, of the ministry of reconciliation).

2. Saint Vincent and the jubilee: his experience and teaching

Vincent lived distinct moments of jubilee of a universal, as well as a local character. Vincent also explained (especially to the Daughters) the meaning of the jubilee and the conditions necessary to obtain the benefits of the jubilee.¹ Aware of the true significance of conversion that is demanded by the jubilee and understood, as stated in the Bull of Pope Francis, as overcoming our attachment to sin, Vincent [CCD:X:196, "and to love God alone"] stated that it was clear that people had not taken advantage of the opportunity that was presented by the jubilee since its purpose had not yet been accomplished (cf. CCD:IX:479).

With regard to Vincent's teaching, we can say that the theme of *mercy* was at the center of his *preaching*. He was always attentive to presenting the paternal and merciful face of God. In the background, we must be mindful of those who have stated that Vincent preached just one sermon, a sermon on the love of God, a sermon that was

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, pp. 38-43, 479-490; volume X, pp. 186-196; 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:IX:38-43, 479-490; X:186-196.

worked and reworked and that took on many different forms. In other words, it is clear that Vincent understood the heart of the gospel as well as the needs of the people of the 17th century, who lived in constant fear and needed to be calmed and consoled. With the establishment of the Congregation, we see the coming together of several events. First, we can say that the origin of the Congregation was not only the result of a confession (the confession of the dying man in Folleville), but was also the result of the preaching of the sermon on 25 January. The Lucan text of 4:18-22 in which we find Jesus preaching in the synagogue of Nazareth refers to *a year acceptable to the Lord* and unites the gestures of the God of mercy (healing) to the good news of God that saves. This text has been constituted as a point of reference for every experience of jubilee.

There is another relationship that should also be mentioned. Pope Francis has made the benefits of the jubilee available not only to those who pass through the Holy Doors of the Roman Basilicas, but also to those who pass through the doors of many other churches and shrines, and not only that. He has further stated that the doors of many other places in the city can also be utilized, the doors of hospitals and prisons. Vincent, when speaking about the visits that the Daughters made to the infirm and the elderly stated: *you, Sisters, can visit the churches while making your rounds visiting the poor ... since the service you render to persons who are poor is also rendered to Him* (CCD:IX:488). The same universal and local dimension of the jubilee places demands on two aspects of the Vincentian mission. Let us listen here to Vincent as he speaks to the Sisters about their form of service: *So then, Sisters, nurse those poor patients with great charity and gentleness so that they may see that you're assisting them with a heart filled with compassion for them* (CCD:X:445). *Compassion* not sentimentalism and that compassion should reflect the manner in which God acts on behalf of all men and women: the joining together of *effective and affective love*.

3. The Sacrament of Reconciliation and Us

The sacrament of Penance, general confession, forgiveness, reconciliation, all of which are required elements for the jubilee, should not only be part of our doctrinal language, but should also be part of our missionary ministry. We have a many faceted relationship with the sacrament:

- Above all else, we are the beneficiaries of the sacrament. We ought to question ourselves about the quality of our sacramental experience, not only the frequency with which we participate in this sacrament, but also the motives behind our participation in the sacrament. In other words, we are challenged to go beyond our customary manner of participation in order to discover *the joy of the encounter*, which in turn enables us, in the words of the Papal Bull *Misericordiae Vultus*, to revive the call to true conversion and to the renunciation of every attachment to sin. Therefore, are we satisfied with our manner of confessing? Do we receive spiritual strength to continue our journey through life?
- After we have been constituted as ministers and, even more, after we have been constituted as *Vincentians*, we are bound to the ministry of confession by vocation and by mission and by the very origin of the Congregation. It is a service, a weighty service, but also a beautiful service because it enables people to encounter the Lord. Because this is a service that has been entrusted to us, we should never lord it over others. We ought to be faithful to the command that we have received and should not give in to the temptation of exaggerated rigidity (the Pope reminds us not to transform the confessional into a tribunal or a torture chamber) or some form of laxity (look at the examples that have recently been placed before us: Saint Pio of Pietrelcina and Saint Leopoldo Mandic). We are invited to be merciful ministers who follow the example of Jesus as he condemned sin but expressed forbearance toward sinners.
- We must become *credible witnesses*. In other words, what we teach and what we celebrate in the name of the Church, we should also practice in our personal lives. In that way we reveal to people that we believe in the reality of the sacrament, that we participate in the sacrament, thus living the message of joy and revealing authentic signs of true conversion and detachment from sin. Here we refer to *two closely related aspects* of the sacrament:
 - *Forgiveness*: affirming the reality that we need forgiveness and that we cannot forgive ourselves, we ought therefore to give witness to the fact that we stand before a gift that is the fruit of the God's gracious initiative: God never ceases to forgive us while often we become weary of asking for forgiveness and weary of forgiving. Therefore, do we experience the need for forgiveness and in what ways do we

prolong in our life the experience of forgiveness? In being “pardoned” do we become true instruments and witnesses of forgiveness? Furthermore, if we are “pardoned” and continually “saved and redeemed,” then we ought to live and express the reality of forgiveness as an evangelical lifestyle.

- *Reconciliation*: reconciled by God and with God we experience the need of living that reconciliation within the Church, in our community, with our confreres, with everyone whom we encounter, with all of creation (cf. # 1469, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*). If sin is “division, rupture, and contraposition,” then reconciliation ought to lead us to rebuild what has been destroyed. We ought to move from the construction of walls to the building of bridges, thus prolonging in our daily lives the reality of our relationship with God.

We know that in the history of the Church, the Sacrament of Reconciliation has undergone radical changes and we have still not found a definitive solution. However, this does not eliminate the need for forgiveness, especially since we are most aware of the reality of sin. Since we are called to explain the reality of the sacrament to the faithful, we ought to discover for ourselves the richness of this gift and this means of grace that has been offered to us. In this way we will be ever more disposed *as ministers of God’s mercy*.

Continuing our reflection

- Let us read the three conferences that Vincent gave to the Daughters of Charity on “The Jubilee.” We will find there some very relevant elements.
- With regard to the sacrament of Reconciliation, we ought to attempt to discover its positive aspects: this will enable us to view the sacrament from the perspective of an encounter with the God of joy and consolation rather than as a burden.
- We should avoid the attitude of the Scribes and Pharisees who murmured against Jesus when he forgave the paralytic and cured him of his paralysis. We should rejoice at the fact that God’s mercy is extended to everyone.
- *Let us become merciful as the Father is merciful* (cf. Matthew 5:7) in order to receive and rejoice in the mercy that is promised in the beatitudes.

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