

A Retrospect on the Year of Vincentian Collaboration

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A. Introduction

In December 2013, the Vincentian Family Collaboration Commission (VFCC) began to request that 2015 be named the International Year of Vincentian Collaboration. There were two reasons behind this proposal:

To communicate to the Vincentian Family, on multiple levels, the effects of good collaboration in the service of those living in poverty; and

To begin remote preparation for 2017 which will mark the 400th anniversary of the Vincentian charism.

The Vincentian Family Executive Committee (VFEC), during its January 2014 meeting, invited the VFCC to draft a detailed proposal for this special year. That proposal was accepted by the VFEC in January 2015 and paved the way for the celebration we have just completed.

B. Major Components of the Year

On 15 March 2015, Father Gregory Gay, CM announced to the Vincentian Family the details for the Year of Vincentian Collaboration, as well as the theme which would guide it: *Together in Christ we Vincentians make a difference*. On Pentecost Sunday, 24 May 2015, in a video filmed in Saint Peter's Square in Rome, Father Gregory officially opened the year.

The Year of Vincentian Collaboration was planned around three components.

I. Celebrate

The Vincentian Family (VF), on local, regional, and national levels, was invited to gather in prayerful celebration three times during the year:

On Pentecost 2015 to begin the year together by thanking God for the gifts of one another given in service to those most in need;

On 27 September 2015, to celebrate a world day of prayer and to reflect on the present reality of the VF, being mindful of the emerging needs of those living in poverty in a particular region; and

On Pentecost 2016, to close the year by asking the Holy Spirit to help the local VF move further into action in response to the most pressing needs of others.

II. Connect and Learn

There are approximately 225 branches which make up the international Vincentian Family. Unfortunately, many of us are like strangers to one another. Based on the conviction that you cannot collaborate with those whom you do not know, the VFCC decided to highlight one branch of the VF each week during the year.

We also looked internationally for models of collaboration, which could be replicated in other places by the Vincentian Family. Once a month we highlighted such works with the hope of stimulating more common projects on behalf of those living in poverty.

III. Serve

The VFCC also invited members of the Vincentian Family to share with one another their service experiences. They were invited to do so by video or by written word.

The Year of Vincentian Collaboration ran from Pentecost 2015 to Pentecost 2016. But what was its impact on the Vincentian Family or, more importantly, on those whom all of us have been called to serve?

C. Significant Moments

I would like to begin by offering an initial impression of how the three components of the year seemed to work. We are now in the

process of asking national councils and international leaders to offer more formal evaluations. Once they are received, we will be in a better position to access impact. I offer here my initial thoughts.

I. Celebrate

During the course of the Year, we asked VF groups to send us pictures and write ups of their three celebrations. We got some at the beginning, less for the second, and none for the third. Yet, in speaking with Vincentians from around the world, they said they did gather to celebrate and reflect. Unfortunately, they were also being true to an unwritten dynamic of our Vincentian charism – silence!

I will return to this point later in this reflection.

II. Connect and Learn

Over the course of the year, through the FamVin website, we highlighted approximately 50 branches of the Vincentian Family. In addition, we received testimonies from the VF National Councils of Ecuador, India, and Venezuela. Rounding out this aspect of the year, VF leaders offered their reflections on the significance of collaboration within the Family.

In addition, we highlighted the joint efforts of the VF through special projects, which are currently underway in Lebanon, Brazil, Paraguay, Madagascar, the USA, South Sudan, Croatia, the Philippines, Slovakia, and Great Britain. Each of these reflects creative approaches to the challenges of poverty, which can only be met effectively when we work together as a Family.

Until we receive feedback from the Vincentian Family we will not know its true impact. How many people actually read what was posted? Were any inspired to action by what they read? Did any of the articles about the branches of the Vincentian Family lead to the forging of new relationships on the local or national levels? All of these questions remain to be answered.

III. Serve

Some individual testimonies were offered at the start of the year. Currently, Vincentians are being “challenged” to offer on *Facebook* their reflections explaining what the year has meant to them.

All in all, the VFCC achieved what it set out to do. It was an aggressive agenda which demanded great sacrifice from many members of the Commission. But it was undertaken with zeal and fervor for the sake of the Family and those we serve, whom they love.

In hindsight, there are a number of considerations that we might keep in mind for any future efforts of this kind:

a. During the lead-up to the Year of Vincentian Collaboration, as we looked to contact the branches of the Family or the leaders of national VF Councils, we came to realize:

- The database on which we were relying was incomplete and out of date;
- Many branches of the VF have either no or little “presence” on the web; and
- Our information about national groups was limited or non-existent.

The newly created Vincentian Family Office (VFO) will be a great help in overcoming these difficulties. Since it began operation in Philadelphia in 2015, it has already updated the database and begun to establish contact with each of the national councils of the Vincentian Family. In addition, with the help of the newly created Vincentian Family Office Advisory Committee, composed of national council presidents, we will be better able to keep abreast of the successes and challenges being faced by the Vincentian Family on the local and regional levels.

b. As we received information during the year, I was personally moved by the energy and zeal of the VF, as well as its collaborative efforts in so many places around the world. Our lay Vincentians seem to have instinctively grasped the significance of this year. By stark contrast, many vowed Vincentians seemed to feel that they have had enough of the year of (*whatever*) and were not quite as enthusiastic. Yet it is obvious that in many places we are living the charism exactly where Vincent would want us to be – on the peripheries of society where those who struggle against poverty reside.

c. Communication remains a major concern of mine. With all of the publicity on the web, in social media, and through personal email contact, there were still those who seemed to have heard nothing about this past year. This was true on many local levels. Sadly it was also true on some national levels, where there was barely a reference made to the year we were celebrating as a Vincentian Family.

As I look back on these realities, I can only hope that we can continue to build on what has already been done and not allow what was lacking to prevent us from seeking creative means to continue to work together with and for our brothers and sisters living in poverty.

D. Lessons for the Vincentian Family

Living this Year of Vincentian Collaboration has deepened in me the conviction that **ONLY** together in Christ can we Vincentians make a difference. The days of working in silos, uninterested and / or disconnected from others – and especially the other branches of the Vincentian Family – are over. The challenges of poverty, the complexities of the systems that perpetuate poverty, the demands of funding, and the utilization of other available resources to fight poverty, as well as our reality as Vincentians, demand a new way of approaching our ministries from their very inception.

These new means are both individual and corporate. I personally have to decide to work with others; we have to decide to work together corporately. Both aspects go hand in hand.

At the same time, we as a Vincentian Family also need to put into place structures that will make such joint actions more the rule than the exception. Based on the experience of this past year, as well as on what we have encountered during the first year that the VFO has been in operation, I would like to propose that the following elements are essential for the continued growth of the Vincentian charism in today's world.

a. The support of good formation

Our Mission is to proclaim Jesus, the evangelizer and servant of those living in poverty. As human beings, we Vincentians need to be nourished and supported so that we may remain faithful to what the

Lord has asked of us. Ongoing formation for the mission is essential, not only to our personal spiritual growth, but also to the effectiveness of our fight against poverty.

Various groups of the Vincentian Family have developed tools for this – the Vincentian Family Collaborative Action Program (VFCAP), the Systemic Change Workshop, the Wise Asset Management Workshop, and the Missionary Cenacle Family Spiritual Exercises are but a few examples. Hopefully more and more individual Vincentians, as well as national entities, will make use of these resources, which are available to them.

b. The support and/or development of national Vincentian Family Councils

The VF is incarnated in the regions encompassed by the national councils. The strength of national councils greatly determines the vitality of the VF's outreach to those in poverty. Every effort must be made to support their efforts and to encourage their growth.

Many national councils struggle to develop a common or shared project to alleviate poverty. To remain credible and viable, they feel the need to move beyond simply celebrating feast days and formation experiences together. National councils are also challenged by stability. All too often the effectiveness of a council or in some cases even the existence of a council, depends upon the vowed members (most often CMs or DCs), who are assigned to a particular region. The VF, as a whole, needs to be freed from this cycle of dependency if it is ever going to embrace the fullness of its calling to the evangelization and service of those in poverty.

c. The willingness to risk creativity and forgiveness

All our efforts to work together entail some kind of risk. Vincent and Louise knew this all too well as they helped each other to listen to the voice of Divine Providence and to act boldly on behalf of their Lords and Masters.

No new effort in the fight against poverty is without risk. And no human relationship in any collaborative effort can be sustained without the willingness to forgive. So much more can be said about these, but I would simply like to mention them here.

E. Lessons for the Congregation of the Mission

Reflecting for a moment on how the Year of Vincentian Collaboration may have impacted the Congregation, I would like to offer the following observations.

- *The Vincentian Family is an integral part of who we are as the sons of Saint Vincent.* We have been blessed over these past 12 years by the leadership and example of Father Gregory Gay in this regard. Where our confreres live this conviction, many wonderful things are happening – and those living in poverty are better served because of it. Unfortunately, at times we can still hear confreres negating this aspect of our Vincentian vocation. There is still work to be done in this area of our community lives.
- *Do we really believe in working together?* We are not going to embrace the Vincentian Family if we do not embrace one another! While most confreres affirm the principal of a common approach to ministry, our lived experience is quite different in too many instances. This observation comes not from me, but from the Provincial Assembly reports sent to the Preparatory Commission for GA2016. Confreres are calling us to a change in our situation and perspective with regard to the manner in which we work together. Such a change will reap much fruit not only in the Congregation, but also throughout the Vincentian Family.
- *The need to encourage not control, to animate not manipulate.* Many Vincentians look to the Congregation for leadership and formation. Those leadership and formational skills are special gifts that we bring to the Vincentian Family, and especially to its lay members. The formation of the laity is a core ministry of the Congregation. There is no better place for us to exercise this ministry than within our own Family.

F. Conclusion

Previously I stated that I would mention anew the “vow” most Vincentians seem to take – that of silence!

Without a doubt, Vincent teaches us to be humble in our journey with Jesus. He teaches us not to place importance on what we do, but

on what God does through us. But humility and silence are not the same!

All too often, we do not know what each other is doing. That can even be true of confreres living in the same house. It is certainly true from one house to another in the same province. And so the circle of silence widens as we move to the provincial and international levels of the Congregation.

The same dynamic is evident in the Vincentian Family. We do not know what Vincentians from other branches are doing in our own neighborhoods and cities, let alone countries. We are always too busy to write about it and share that information, be it on FamVin, cmglobal, *Facebook*, or other means of communication.

And we all are diminished because of this. We miss out on opportunities to support one another, to learn from one another, and ultimately to serve more effectively. Unless we understand that sharing our stories is not an “additional” activity but part of the very fabric of what we do, this dynamic will not change among us. The gifts we have been given are meant to be shared, so that all may rejoice in what God is doing among us.

As we prepare for the 2017 celebration of the 400th Anniversary of the Charism, my hope is that the Vincentian Family, as well as our Little Company, will continue to tell the story of how the Lord has blessed us with a special vocation and sent us to serve those who are dearest to his heart, our Lords and Masters.