

Collaboration in the Heart of the Vincentian Charism

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1. Introductory Remarks

From the time that I arrived at this global forum of the United Nations in October 2015, I became aware of the tension that exists between the paradigms, the various world views, and the different ideas with regard to the world in which we want to live. This paradigmatic struggle is the context in which we place the option that the Vincentian Family has made with regard to collaboration as a relational style, as a theological/spiritual dynamic, and as a way of fulfilling our mission.

We live in the midst of a society in which separation, fragmentation, and disconnectedness prevail as a way of thinking and seeing, as a way of being and acting.¹ The conviction that things and people are separate islands is characteristic of this dominant paradigm. Yet from an anthropological, ecological, and theological perspective, said paradigm is destructive. We soon recognize, however, that the elements of collaboration, networking, communion, encounter, and dialogue are imperatives for our Vincentian vocation and are also cries that rise up from every place in which we minister. Today, the concepts of “encounter” and “relationship” present us with the possibility of becoming a part of one of the best prophetic lines, that is, a line of

¹ Here I present an analysis that was done by Navdanya Internacional. In order to deepen one’s understanding of this paradigm and its consequences for humankind and for the earth, I would suggest reading the pamphlet that it published, *The living earth: our soil, our common goods, our future* (Tierra viva: nuestro suelo, nuestro bienes comunes, nuestro futuro). This document is the result of the work of an international group of experts in various disciplines that met in Florence in 2015. The Spanish edition of this work can be found at: <http://seedfreedom.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Terra-Viva-Español.pdf> [Translator’s Note: I was unable to find an online edition of this publication in English].

prophecy that heralds a new way of being, and that denounces this paradigm of separation as the destruction of the very possibility of human existence and, therefore, a threat to the existence of all life.

The direction that the United Nations has sketched out for humanity for the next 15 years (the 2030 Agenda)² is grounded on 17 objectives of sustainable development. In light of the reality that the problems which we confront are global and systemic in nature, so then the solutions must also be global and systemic. Therefore, there is a need to create an evermore interconnected network of collaboration on every level. Without collaboration among cultures, races, religions, nations, and people, there can be no new humanity, no sustainable development. Our option for *ad intra* and *ad extra* collaboration is our commitment to the 2030 agenda of the United Nations for a new and sustainable humankind. We make that commitment aware of our global citizenship. As a Vincentian Family, we do not want to, nor are we able to exclude ourselves from participation in the various social-political, academic, inter-ecclesial forums that are pointing the way that leads to our future.

In order to contrast the dominant paradigm in the culture of separation and fragmentation, I will use the paradigm proposed by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'*, the paradigm of eco-humanity which is also a paradigm of encounter, collaboration, relationship, and interdependence and, therefore, a paradigm of solidarity, compassion, and mercy.

Collaboration is a concrete manner of incarnating the Triune God. To say “God” and “collaboration” in the same breath is redundant. Incarnating collaboration is a necessity for the Vincentian Family (on both an individual level, as well as on a community level), especially if we ever wish to be present in the midst of history in any significant manner (and not, therefore, present as an isolated force³) and if, as a

² This document can be found at:

<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf>.

³ Joan Chittister, OSB, in her book, *The Fire in These Ashes: A Spirituality of Contemporary Religious Life* (1996) affirms that *religious life was never intended to be simply a workforce in the Church; its true intention was to be an intense presence, a paradigm of seeking, a sign of the human soul, and a catalyst for society's conscience from which freedom emerges* [Translator's Note: This is my translation of the passage, no page reference was given in the original article and it would be difficult to search the book for one sentence.]

result of our presence, we are able to have an impact on the hopes of people, providing signs to men and women that something new is possible: *Behold, I make all things new* (Revelation 21:5).

2. Challenges of Collaboration in the Context of the Paradigm of Separation

*Upon this handful of soil our survival depends. Husband it and it will grow our food, our fuel, and our shelter and surround us with beauty. Abuse it and the soil will collapse and die, taking humanity with it.*⁴

For the first time in the history of the human race, we find ourselves in a situation in which our future as a species is not guaranteed. The recurrent ecological, financial, and political crises have placed humankind in an alarming situation. Climatic catastrophes, hunger, poverty, unemployment, crime, conflicts, and wars seem to be moving us toward final collapse: *all creation is groaning in labor pains even until now* (Romans 8:22). Some people have begun to ask themselves if these groans and pains that continue to multiply are a proclamation of life or an announcement of approaching death.

In his encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis highlights some of the consequences of the paradigm of separation. There are many similarities between the prophetic vision of the Pope and the warnings that experts have been presenting to us as alarming consequences that should not leave us indifferent:

- ✓ The disintegration of the natural world as a result of not accepting the limits of our planet;
- ✓ The exponential growth of the ecological footprint;
- ✓ The disintegration of the world and the breakdown of the social fabric, which have resulted in crisis with regard to coexistence and an anthropological crisis that has had devastating consequences, which are becoming more and more obvious;
- ✓ The disappearance of democracy, the multiplication of failed states, resulting in a political crisis and an institutional vacuum;
- ✓ The primacy of the individual good over the common good, resulting in a lack of respect with regard to human rights and human life itself;
- ✓ An increase in individual, structural, and national inequality;

⁴ From Vedas Sanskrit Scripture – 1500 BC.

- ✓ The emergence of new conflicts and new forms of violence;
- ✓ The proliferation of famines and wars, the catastrophic effects of climate change that make millions of men, women, and children live as refugees and immigrants, people in search of a place where they can survive;
- ✓ Trafficking in human beings, arms, and drugs, the emergence of new slaveries.⁵

We know that the others (the poor, the laity, women, civil society, minorities) do not allow themselves to be eliminated. They persist and resist and survive. The Vincentian Family has a special protagonist role in resisting the elimination of “the other,” the elimination of those who are different, the least among us, the apparently insignificant ones. Indeed, as a result of its origins and vocation the Vincentian Family is called to be prophetic and to cry out against uniformity and exclusion.⁶

Saint Vincent resisted the established order and effectively began an ecclesial revolution that has not yet reached its peak: the revolution of collaboration which involves, the laity, the poor, and women.

In this context, the Vincentian Family has a specific mission, namely, to be a point of reference with regard to the meaning of a spiritual awakening and to be a behavioral and relational sign – in

⁵ Translator’s Note: in the Spanish text of this article this paragraph is followed by these words: *En esta cosmovisión, “lo otro no existe: tal es la fe racional, la incurable creencia de la razón humana”⁶. Mi identidad es igual a la realidad total, “como si todo hubiera de ser; absoluta y necesariamente, uno y lo mismo: Yo.”* It has been very difficult to translate these words in some sensible manner and so I have simply omitted them from the text but what follows here is my attempt (a very poor attempt I admit) to translate those sentences: *In this world vision, the other does not exist: such is rational faith and the incurable belief in human reason* (Octavio Paz cites Antonio Machado in the introduction of his book, *La Liberinto de la Sociedad*, Penguin Books, 1997). *An individual’s identity is the same as the total reality, as if everything were being, absolutely and necessarily one and the same: “I”.*

⁶ Translator’s Note: I have omitted the following words from the English text, words that are found in the Spanish text, but which were very difficult to translate in a sensible manner that would enhance the text: *“El otro es la esencial, heterogeneidad del ser”. La otredad es una incurable enfermedad que padece lo uno, lo otro, el otro, la otra; es como una enfermedad gozosa. La crisis estructural de las religiones, incluida la Iglesia Católica, es también una consecuencia de todo lo anterior.* [My very poor translation of those words is: “The other is the essential heterogeneity of being.” Otherness is an incurable disease that afflicts one and the other; it is like a joyful disease. The structural crisis of religions, including the Catholic religion, is also a consequence of the above].

permanent collaboration – that enables the mission to be fulfilled. As members of the Vincentian Family we are to give witness to a new way of being in history and to demonstrate to others that it is possible to believe in and relate to others and to act in a different manner. Is the Vincentian Family a sign of this newness? In what ways is collaboration essential to this newness that we desire?

The Vincentian Family has been, is, and will always be at the crossroads of history, because it is “pro-cultural.” The Vincentian Family promotes and defends the culture of life, peace, justice, solidarity, and collaboration. The Vincentian Family wants to be seed, yeast, and ferment of a new culture in which life is possible, where no one calls into question the dignity of another, but rather promotes the dignity and the rights of all people. As a charismatic family we are on the side of life because we are on the side of a merciful God, the source of life itself.

The Vincentian Family knows that, in every form of groaning, God is communicating a message and, therefore, no cry is foreign to us and that includes the cries of the new forms of human slavery.⁷ As we share in the sufferings of our brothers and sisters, we cry out to God whom we believe loves all people and is present in the midst of those people, who continually ask the question: Where is God? God responds to impoverished humanity (God’s other passion) by standing beside people and assuring them of the fact that God has not abandoned the work of his hands.⁸

Faced with the “impotence” of God, the Vincentian Family is confronted with an opportunity to shoulder the human task of embracing the pain of God in the world, the pain of humanity, and the pain of the earth, the two places of our common home. That is a genuine prophecy, an experience of collaboration and co-responsibility that ought to arise from within us and then move outward to all our relationships and the various communities where we develop spirituality, brotherhood/sisterhood, and mission. Such collaboration

⁷ The Meeting of the Daughters of Charity regarding the new forms of slavery, Mexico (2016).

⁸ In this regard, see the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (293-314): *For you love all things that are and loathe nothing that you have made; for what you hated, you would not have fashioned. And how could a thing remain, unless you will it; or be preserved, had it not been called forth by you? But you spare all things, because they are yours, O Lord and lover of souls* (Wisdom 12:24-26).

should be an integral part of our daily lives. It should be so natural to us that we do not have to put into our schedules the times that we will take in order to walk beside humankind as it journeys toward liberation.

Today we also perceive unmistakable signs of a paradigmatic crisis within our Family. Pope Francis has been very clear in speaking about these signs. The words that the Pope addressed to the religious in Morelia (Mexico), should echo in all our hearts: *Lead us not into the temptation of resignation*. We cannot be an ecclesial community that has given into the temptation of resignation, a family that has ceased to journey forward and to look for something better than that which is offered by a paradigm of life that leaves no room for the gospel and that sacrifices the human person to the tyranny of narcissism and isolation. The Pope affirms that *the great danger in today's world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience. Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God's voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades* (*Evangelii Gaudium*, #2). The opportunity for collaboration (a relational experience) becomes diminished and we need to be *liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption* (*Evangelii Gaudium*, #8).

These, then, are some of the signs of the paradigm of separation and they are also the groans and cries that arise from within, from our identity and mission. To incarnate the call to collaboration in all that we are and in all that we do means that we know how to listen to our own groans:

- ✓ Self-absorption – worldliness;
- ✓ Isolation: toxic loneliness, double lifestyle;
- ✓ Fundamental disconnect with reality;
- ✓ Relational, spiritual, and missionary monotony: ritualism;
- ✓ Emptiness in life that produces existential anguish and vocational confusion;
- ✓ Community disintegration: the community becomes the place where all one's personal problems become accentuated;
- ✓ Lack of passion and zeal for the charism and for building up the Kingdom;

- ✓ Deification of structures, compulsive activism. It is becoming very typical that people are concerned about the chronological length of life and not as concerned about a life lived with integrity⁹;
- ✓ A lack of a sense of belonging; an inability to give meaning and direction to our life and an inability to do this together; more and more members of the Vincentian Family do not feel at home among us.

As the Triune God places us in the midst of this paradigm of separation and fragmentation, we become aware of the fact that the creativity/newness in the experience of the Triune God (described in Sacred Scripture) is rooted in God's relationship with reality. Reality is one of the ways in which God communicates with us. God goes out to the encounter with the human person and does so through reality. Our ability to renew and to recreate ourselves is weakened when we distance ourselves and ignore the reality in which we live.¹⁰

When history is grounded on the paradigm of separation, we find ourselves obliged to look anew toward the Trinity and, from the perspective of the theology of encounter and collaboration, we are challenged to rethink and to give new meaning to our identity and our mission. To highlight this year as a time of Vincentian collaboration is, in fact, a theological response to the urgency of our common vocation. In that context, collaboration (which can harmonize/theologize our relationships, mission, and community life) continually calls us toward a germinal future.

3. Collaboration is a Proper/Original Element of the Charism

If we accept the fact that God has given us a responsibility to care for humanity and to care for the planet earth (both of which are threatened by the paradigm of life that has resulted from a lifestyle that

⁹ Saint James reminds us that life is like a cloud that appears in the morning and then fades away in the afternoon; cf. James 4:14.

¹⁰ Jesus warned the people of his era about their inability to understand the situation in which they lived and he told them: *When you see (a) cloud rising in the west you say immediately that it is going to rain – and so it does; and when you notice that the wind is blowing from the south you say that it is going to be hot – and so it is. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky; why do you not know how to interpret the present time?* (Luke 12:54-56).

human beings have decided to adopt), then we must necessarily engage in a process of cultural and paradigmatic conversion. In his encyclical and his apostolic exhortation, Pope Francis speaks about a twofold conversion: a pastoral conversion: a conversion of “doing” (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, #25-35) and an ecological conversion: a conversion of “being” (cf. *Laudato Si'*, #1-16). This twofold conversion has a common denominator, namely, a conversion to communion and to the establishment of relationships. Collaboration is a concrete manner that can bring about said conversion.

The Vincentian Family has to be converted to the realities of communion/collaboration that flow from the Trinity. The Good News of God, Trinitarian communion (relationship) can only be proclaimed by us when we promote human experiences in the Vincentian Family and in the Church, experiences rooted in the principle that it is possible to relate to and to act in communion with everything that exists. Communion challenges us to give witness to the possibility that such communion is possible. We know that when communion is ruptured, reconciliation is a possibility. Furthermore, we also know that internal and external community conflicts need not rupture communion/collaboration but can, in fact, be an opportunity to provide a new dynamic to communion/collaboration. What destroys communion/collaboration is resentment, passive-aggressive behavior, isolation, hopelessness/helplessness, and vengeance that often arise as a consequence of community conflicts. It is, then, that we become incapable of cooperating in a mission and incapable of promoting a lifestyle that concretizes and makes visible everything that we believe about communion.

Our charism originated from various forms of significant collaboration. The collaborative relationship between Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul, between the first three branches of the Vincentian Family (the Confraternities, the Missionaries, and the Daughters of Charity), collaboration with the Royal Court, as well as with the political, financial, and religious powers of 17th century France, all these forms of collaboration were quite natural to Vincent as he engaged in the progressive development of the charism that had been received from the Spirit.

Our charism is characterized by this collaboration which is one of the dynamics of this spiritual and missionary association. It is an affective and effective dynamic. This dynamic has fostered the building

up of the Vincentian Family and today impels us to form local, national, continental, and global networks that connect us with a vast number of people and organizations of good will. The intrinsic purpose of this collaboration is service on behalf of a common mission: *go and proclaim to the poor that the Kingdom of God is near*. Today, as we engage in that same process of proclamation, we give witness to the reality that another world is possible. Collaboration on behalf of and with the poor is one of the signs that continues to give hope to the excluded members of society.

As a Family, we are called to be a living gospel: Good News! The words that Jesus spoke to his apostles are also addressed to us as members of the Vincentian Family: *So that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me ... so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be brought to perfection as one, that the world may know that you sent me and that you loved them even as you love me* (John 17:21-23). Collaboration is at the service of communion, and living and ministering in a spirit of communion is the best way to fulfill the mission that was entrusted to Vincent de Paul and that is now entrusted to us.

Four hundred years ago, at the time that our charism was established, collaboration was a central element that connected the community with multiple forms of networks and did that on various levels. Our charism gave life to a new and very natural dynamic, a dynamic that invited other people to join together and to participate in building a more just and equitable society in which there is room for everyone. This element is proper to us and is part of our legacy, a unique legacy that is transformed in a creative manner, especially during this new global era.

As we pause and reflect on the reality of collaboration in our Vincentian Family, we immediately recognize the importance of formation. Indeed, from an historical perspective, collaboration in the Vincentian Family must involve the formation of all its members so that the Family can continue to be sustained. We must continue to provide formation to the lay members of our Family. In this sense, then, it is equally important to promote community life among the laity, because that is an indispensable support for animating and sustaining Vincentian life among the laity. We must offer the laity formation programs that will provide them with the tools that will

enable them to develop collaborative relationships and collaborative methods with regard to their ministry. We must recognize the importance of lay formation and integrate that formation into the various processes of service on behalf of our common mission.

4. Foundational Elements

Collaboration in a common mission (*Missio Dei*) is rooted in the Trinity: God-Collaboration-Mission. In reality the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit constitute a unity that is in permanent collaboration. In the *ad extra* work of God's creative and saving love, there is a constant collaboration among the members of the Trinity, a collaboration that flows from a continual "yes": *my Father is at work until now, so I am at work* (John 5:17). This God-Collaboration-Mission calls us and invites us to work as God works. God is present in the uncertainties of a life dedicated to making all things new. God needs collaborators who are willing to engage in this endeavor: *you, too, go into my vineyard* (Matthew 20:1-16). God invites us to engage in a process of collaboration that is like a river of life-giving water and all people are invited to submerge themselves in that dynamic. All people, in as much as created beings, collaborate in the creative and redemptive work of God. The whole world is fertile ground for collaboration and all people are to be agents of this collaborative dynamic.

From a Christian theological perspective, the dynamic of collaboration is rooted in baptism. The Second Vatican Council highlighted that reality when it referred to the common mission of all the people of God. All people are collaborators in the mission of Jesus Christ. This theological reality was also reaffirmed by the Church in Latin America and the Caribbean when it stated that all baptized men and women are missionary-disciples in a Church of communion and participation. In view of that baptismal perspective, collaboration must extend beyond the Church's visible borders and must reach out to other Christians, to believers of other religions, and to all people of good will. We experience ourselves as called to collaborate in a way that urges us go beyond the limits of our "small little world," in a manner that brings us into harmony with humankind and with the earth which is *our common home* (a reality that Pope Francis highlighted in his encyclical, *Laudato Si'*).

Without any hesitation we can affirm that the grace of collaboration is being poured out in an evermore abundant manner upon the Vincentian Family. As Christian-Vincentians we seek to integrate, in a creative manner, our shared charism into every aspect of our lives. Vincentian identity is determined by three essential elements that are rooted in the very origin of our charism: first, a personal experience of Jesus Christ and of the kingdom; second, belonging to and participating in an ecclesial community through membership in some branch of the Vincentian Family; third, orienting one's life toward service on behalf of the poor, service which might involve direct contact with the poor, the service of charity, development of systematic change projects, and/or direct participation in the formulation of public policy that defends and promotes the rights of those individuals excluded from participation in society. Christian-Vincentians are sent forth to love those whom God loves. Thus, the poor are the absolute and original subject of our charism and we minister to/with the poor as we follow Jesus. We do all of this in community and through the dynamic of collaboration.

The laity, feminine protagonists, collaboration *ad intra* and *ad extra*, new forms of consecration, new significance and meaning with regard to vows, ecclesial reform, etc., all these are new horizons for the multiple charisms present in today's Church. That, however, is not so for us. The Vincentian charism came into existence in 1617 with the establishment of a group of laywomen that became known as the Confraternity of Charity. That was not some accidental event, but an occurrence that speaks loudly about what we are called to be and to do in this complex era in which we live.

5. Collaboration in the Midst of Diversity

As the body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ. For in one Spirit we are all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:12-13).

By its nature the Vincentian charism is diverse. Men and women of every culture, race, age, gender, people who live as Christians in multiple various manners, all these countless individuals have shared in our charism. When the Church, and consequently the Vincentian Family, forgets its origins (the communion of the Three Persons), then

unity becomes uniformity and one group of the faithful takes on the responsibilities of all the other groups and also places obstacles in the path of the participation of other groups (clericalism). Such neglect creates a situation in which the interests of the Kingdom become subordinated to the denominational/confessional interests (ethnocentrism) and also a situation in which the crystal clear waters become a pool of stagnant water (pastoral and theological inertia). In order to recover the diversity and the communion that create a dynamic unity and that lead to participation and collaboration, we must imitate the life of the Trinity.¹¹

In light of an ever-increasing pluralism in the world, collaboration presents us with an opportunity to eliminate clericalism in the Church, which in turn enables us to clothe ourselves in Christian humility. Such an attitude provides a new dynamism to the ecclesial body, to the life and the mission of all Christians, who for so long have been forced to live in a state of baptismal anonymity.

Today the faithful are more sensitive to the reality of diversity, communion, and participation in the Church. For example, today when we speak about the collaboration of the laity, we are referring to something quite different from that which we previously envisioned and practiced. The laity today are aware of the reality that they, like consecrated men and women, and as a result of their baptism, have been called to holiness, called to perfection, called to participate in the apostolate, and to take on a more active and responsible role in the church and in society, a role that the Latin American Episcopal Conference (gathered together in Santo Domingo) referred to when they spoke about the laity as protagonists of a new era.

In any collaborative process that strengthens communion and fosters participation, respect for the identity of each group, each individual, and every vocation is essential. Thus, our starting point is the reality that all the members of the Vincentian Family, regardless of their lifestyle within the Church and regardless of any other element that might set them apart from others, share the same vocation and mission in the Church and in the world. True, there might be differences in the manner in which people live out and engage in this

¹¹ This paragraph has been taken from Leonardo Boff's book, *La Trinidad es la mayor comunidad* and has been adapted to be read from the perspective of the Vincentian Family and collaboration.

common mission and vocation, but there are no superior or inferior members. All share one common inspiration that unites us; all share one diversity that enriches us.

Therefore, at the present time, there are too many situations in which collaboration is not reciprocal, but rather in which we find ourselves traveling along a one-way street. In other words, there are too many situations in which the laity, who collaborate with consecrated men and/or women within the Vincentian Family, find themselves in a subordinate position or in a situation in which they are “collaborating” in projects which are the property and the responsibility of those consecrated individuals. While the relationship might be respectful, it is often a relationship of employer-employee. In the various ministries of the Congregation, the members are more accustomed to “giving” and “teaching” than to “receiving” and “learning.” Reciprocity and subsidiarity among equals is far from being the common practice in the Vincentian Family and it is clear that we have a long way to go in this matter. Such obsolete forms tend to create in the members of the Family a manner of thinking and acting, attitudes and behavior that have to be overcome so that collaboration among clerics, consecrated men and women, and the laity (all the members of the Vincentian Family) might be developed on a new foundation, on a basis of subsidiarity, mutuality, and reciprocity. All of those elements can be found in the Trinity and therefore, our collaboration must be done *in the image of God*.

True collaboration must be grounded on our attempts to give meaning to our lives and to do this from perspective of diversity and communion, from a perspective that leads us to overcome our anxiety with the concept of “otherness,” which for so long we have confused with the negation of the other, with rejection, oppression, war, and discrimination.

6. By Way of Conclusion

In order for this struggle to have meaning, the oppressed, in seeking to regain their humanity (which is a way to create it), must not become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity

¹² Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed* accessed at:
https://selforganizedseminar.files.wordpress.com/2011/08/freire_pedagogy_oppressed1.pdf

*of both. This, then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well.*¹²

Let us put aside working “for the poor” and let us instead begin to work “with them,” which in turn implies that we will allow them to evangelize us, to humanize us, and to free us. The problem of poverty-exclusion is not simply a structural problem, rather it is a conflict that involves a lack of sensitivity and a lack of vision on the part of many people, including those who, through vocation or a personal option, proclaim a solidarity with those who are poor. Such exclusion becomes even more problematic when the poor are excluded from the process of decision-making, from the process of collaboration, and from the process of participating in those activities that effect their integral liberation and the building up of a more just and equitable global society.

We have the option of responding to the problem of exclusion in a new manner, in a manner that involves those individuals who are marginalized in the process of discernment, decision-making, execution, and collaboration on every level that pertains to their reality and to their aspirations for a new world. Let us be bold as we collaborate with those men and women who live in the midst of poverty. Let us make collaboration a sign of conversion for a society that continues to exclude so many people on every level.

Throughout my life I have participated in many forums in which the poor and poverty were the central themes. My 33 years as a member of the Congregation of the Mission have provided me with the opportunity (the grace) to discern, to decide, and to act (in one way or another) on behalf of the poor of this world. I would say that that has been my life and yet I do not claim to be an expert in this matter. Today I am challenged by this ministry that places me in the midst of the United Nations as the representative of the Congregation, as one who collaborates with the other branches of the Vincentian Family that minister within this institution either in Geneva or in New York.

In light of everything that I have stated, I am convinced that collaboration is an urgent need. We have been given a responsibility and we desire to contribute in some manner to the building up of a new, peaceful, free, just, and equitable society. I believe that this will only be possible when the poor are invited to sit around the global

table, around the national table, and around our own table (the table of the Church and the table of the Vincentian Family). When the excluded members of society experience themselves as one with us, then we will become aware of their real needs and aspirations, then we will discover the paths that will enable them and us to move beyond the present situation, paths that will also enable humanity to move beyond its present situation. The poor have the extraordinary potential to show us those paths before it becomes too late. Therefore, to walk and to be by their side through a process of ongoing collaboration means that we are faithful to the inspiration of the Spirit that enflamed the hearts of our founders and foundresses.