

4

Of Current Interest

Pastoral Memorandum of the Portuguese Episcopal Conference concerning Four Centuries of Evangelization and Three Centuries of Presence in Portugal of the Congregation of the Mission

Fatima, 10 November 2016

1. Vincentian Charism

Four centuries have passed since Vincent de Paul was moved by apostolic zeal and received the heavenly inspiration that called him to found a community of missionaries dedicated to the evangelization of the poor and to the delicate responsibility of spiritual, doctrinal, and pastoral formation of the clergy. Thanks to the apostolic fruitfulness of Vincent's founding insight, the Congregation of the Mission, the Company of the Daughters of Charity, and a multitude of institutions of social service were created for the poorest and the marginalized, of which the Vincentian Conferences today are only one example.

In 2017, we also celebrate the third centenary of the arrival of the Vincentian charism in Portugal, brought here by the Congregation of the Mission.

The Portuguese Episcopal Conference welcomes the joyful anniversary and joins in the thanksgiving and praise that the whole Vincentian Family offers the Lord on this commemorative date. Actually, there are the two events, when we remember not only Saint Vincent's ecclesial mission, but also the charism that inspired him, on behalf of the poor, for the reform of the clergy and the charity he was able to bring about in so many social works.

If many of the French aristocracy of that time found counsel and spiritual assistance in Saint Vincent, it was the poor of the rural world and of the cities that most stirred his soul, encouraging him to practice the works of spiritual and corporal mercy. He chose, therefore, to pastorally serve the Church as a parish priest in a humble rural village and, little by little, he discovered that the true reality of poverty refers as much to the lack of bread as to the need for a living and enlightened faith. Hence, the urgency that he felt in promoting mainly three lines of action: to organize charities, groups of lay Christians dedicated to serving the poor; to carry out popular missions that would awaken the humble people of the countryside and educate them in faith; and to dynamize the cultural and pastoral formation of the clergy by means of conferences and the organization of seminaries.

From the vast work of charity of this founder of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, let us recall here two important lessons. The War of the Fronde with its tentacles of violence had devastated several regions of France, leaving hunger, disease, and all sorts of miseries in its wake. It produced great numbers of displaced people who, fleeing from the fields of battle, were arriving in the cities. Instead of improving the situation, this made it even more serious. With imagination and determination, Vincent immediately went about putting into action a project aimed at curbing the dehumanization of these migrations. He began to send food and other necessities on various roads, thus preventing the poor from having to take long journeys and making life less difficult for them.

Early on, Vincent discovered the importance of mobilizing material and human resources in a well-organized and, therefore, a more effective manner. Once, while preparing to celebrate a Sunday Mass, he was informed of the existence in a distant place of a family whose members were seriously ill. From the pulpit, he exhorted the hearts of the hearers to help in such a painful situation. The response was generous and quick.

But then, how to ensure continuity for this temporary gesture of charity? Vincent realized from experience that charity without organization could end up in a lack of charity. Therefore, he became a master in the art of organizing and directing charities, never forgetting that the charity of Christ should always encourage dedication and service to the poor. Social action, evangelization, formation of the clergy are the three fundamental fields where Saint Vincent worked and where the charism that marked the works that he founded remains alive. That is why, in truth and justice, John Paul II called Vincent de Paul “a man of action and prayer, administration and imagination, of leadership and humility, a man of yesterday and of today” (Address to the General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission in 1986).

2. Presence in Portugal

The Sons of Saint Vincent entered Portugal in the early years of the 18th century. Supported by a Brief of Pope Clement XI authorizing the Congregation’s establishment in the Kingdom of Portugal, Father José Gomes da Costa (1667-1725), a native of Torre de Moncorvo, and superior of the house of Monte Célio in Rome, where he had entered the Congregation, arrived in Lisbon in November 1716, to start the foundation. The Procurator of the Supreme Court of Justice of the Kingdom granted legal existence to the Congregation of the Mission in a document dated 20 May 1717. The Province of Rome, from which the founder came, quickly sent four priests and one brother to form the first community. In 1720, the first house of the Mission was founded, in the farm area of Rilhafoles, in Lisbon, as the central house from which would spread intense and fruitful activity destined to the formation of the clergy and the popular missions.

Until 1834, the life of the Congregation developed around three great centers: Lisbon (house of Rilhafoles), Braga (house of La Cruz), and Evora (the seminary). In addition to this missionary action in the country, there was also intense apostolic activity in

the Far East (seminaries in Goa and Macao, missions in Beijing, Nanking, and Malacca), and also in Brazil, with the missionary activity of Father Antonio Ferreira Viçoso, who would later become the seventh bishop of Mariana.

After its suppression in 1834, the Congregation began to be reestablished after 1857. During this second period, which continued until the establishment of the Republic in 1910, the Congregation's main activities were popular missions, youth formation in schools, the founding and accompaniment of Vincentian Conferences and religious associations, especially in the church of San Luis de los Franceses, in Lisbon, in the residence of Santa Quiteria, Felgueiras, and in Funchal, Madeira, where, along with the chaplaincy of the Hospicio Princesa Dona Amelia, the Congregation assumed the direction of the diocesan Major Seminary.

This admirable growth was abruptly interrupted in 1910, when two virtuous missionaries were assassinated, the priests Alfredo Fragues, Visitor; and Bernardino Barros Gomes, a well-known scientist. Then, reborn from the ashes in 1927, the efforts of the provincial leaders concentrated on the organization of communities and their respective works as well as on the formation of new missionaries. With this purpose in mind, they developed several seminaries: Pombeiro and Oleiros (Felgueiras), and later, Mafra and Braga. New conditions and requirements for academic and pedagogical training forced the establishment of Student Housing in Ameal, Porto, and in La Luz, Lisbon. A new phase of the Mission *Ad Gentes* began in 1940 with the founding of missionary communities in Mozambique. In the 1960s, half of the province's members, almost always the youngest, headed for Mozambique. This required the institution of a more agile and well-organized legal structure in the Mozambican land. There, in 1965, the Vice-Province was born. In addition to their presence side-by-side with the native populations, the missionaries took on the work of the seminaries – in line with the charism of the Founder, and under conditions of great ecclesial responsibility. They directed the formation of the Mozambican clergy in three seminaries. Most of the local clergy, as well as many of the bishops of that country, have passed through these seminaries.

After the independence of Mozambique, the return of some missionaries allowed new works to be undertaken, especially parishes in the dioceses of Santarém, Beja, and Portalegre-Castelo Branco, in addition to the works of the missionary apostolate, already existing in Portugal. The Congregation returned to the traditional work of the popular missions with renewed dedication and evangelizing dynamics. From north to south, teams made up of confreres, Daughters of Charity, and laity studied how to announce the Gospel message in new social and cultural contexts, touring innumerable parishes, invited by the respective bishops and parish priests.

Among these renewed initiatives of evangelization are the Family Communities of Charity, small groups of pastoral agents available to assure the continuity of the evangelization carried out in the popular missions.

3. Challenges of the Vincentian Charism for our time

The heart of the Vincentian Charism is the exercise of charity, modeled by the Divine Teacher. Saint Vincent summed up in two the virtues of the Son of God: union with the Father and charity towards men and women. The updating of this charism today passes on commitment to the poorest that demands concrete actions from all Christians, so that, in the spirit of mission and service to the Church, they are translated into works, rather than into words.

Before anything else and evermore urgent is the return to the Congregation's origins and the spread of the thought and work of the Saint of Charity; this is an imperative of pastoral programs. This new wine of the charism will certainly have consequences for pastoral activity and for the quality of service to the wider Church.

It is also important to see how the institutions are called to be the embodied expression of the charism. But institutions are immersed in the history of rapidly changing societies. That is why it is necessary to be attentive to the signs of the times and discern, in situations that are difficult and so often inhumane, how the Vincentian Charism has to respond with works of mercy to the cry of the poor.

One has to have the courage to readjust the structures from other times, just as clothes have to be refitted for a body that grows and is transforming. In this process of listening and discerning in order to decide how best to participate in ecclesial structures, the prophetic vision of *aggiornamento* of Saint John XXIII continues to be potent to the present day. Opening new horizons, reviving the missionary spirit, being available to go to far-off places, this is characteristic of men who are called by God to continue the salvific work of his Son. Without being naïve or overly optimistic, we do live in times of openness to new projects, recognizing that it is always possible to look ahead and participate in ecclesial initiatives that look beyond our geographical reality. In today's globalized world, borders are mainly the limited horizons where we have locked away our minds and which prevent us from going further.

The Vincentian Charism carries a genetic code of spiritual content transmitted from generation to generation to all branches of the Family. That nucleus of grace that the Spirit animates makes it live in a healthy and continuous "nonconformity with the things of the present world" (Romans 12:2) in a process of a unending search. Really, a gift from heaven, this nucleus of grace is timeless and invites ongoing renewal. Only with the courage of prophets, the vision of mystics, the zeal of missionaries, the simplicity of pure-hearted men and women, and inspired by charity can the spiritual children of Saint Vincent continue doing what the Children of God did in the world.

Those called to evangelize the poor have, as their mission, to announce to them the peace and justice that come as the fruit of the Kingdom of God. To those people who, in this world of crisis and helplessness, are still marked by misfortune, such as the unemployed, refugees, and victims of ever more refined forms of poverty, (Vincentians) must provide reasons to hope for a more just and fraternal world.

In Christ, the Episcopal Conference encourages the heirs of the Vincentian Charism in Portugal to feel committed to all situations that degrade the dignity of man.

In light of the message of mercy witnessed during the Pontificate of Pope Francis, both believers and non-believers are now more attentive to the dehumanization found at the human and existential margins of society. The Vincentian Charism goes forth to share this message of merciful love, which must place the world of the poor at the center of attention of all Christians and men of good will.

Translated from Spanish by Dan Paul Borlik, CM



Holy Father's Message to AIC

From the Vatican on February 22, 2017.

In this year 2017, you celebrate the 400th anniversary of the first Confraternities of Charity, founded by Saint Vincent de Paul in Châtillon. It is with joy that I join spiritually with you in celebrating this anniversary, and I convey my best wishes that this beautiful initiative continue its mission of bringing authentic witness of God's mercy to the poorest. May this anniversary be an occasion for you to give thanks to God for His gifts and to open yourselves to His surprises, to discern, through the breath of the Holy Spirit, new ways to render the service of charity ever more fruitful.

The Charities were born of the tenderness and compassion in the heart of Monsieur Vincent for the poor, often marginalised or abandoned in the countryside and in the towns. Vincent's work for them and with them was intended to reflect God's goodness towards His creatures. He saw the poor as representatives of Jesus Christ, as members of His suffering body; he grasped that the poor, too, were called to build up the Church and in turn to convert us.

In the wake of Vincent de Paul, who entrusted the care of these poor people to the laity, and especially to women, your Association aims to promote the development of the most disadvantaged, and to alleviate the physical, moral, material and spiritual suffering. And it is in God's Providence that the basis of this commitment is found. What is Providence, if not the love of God Who acts in the world and asks for our cooperation? Today too I would like to encourage you to accompany the person fully, paying special attention to the precarious living conditions of many women and children. The life of faith, the life united with Christ, enables us to see the person's reality, his incomparable dignity, not as something limited to

material goods, to social, economic and political issues, but rather as a being created in the image and semblance of God, like a brother or sister, our neighbour for whom we are responsible. In order to “see” poverty and to approach it, it is not enough to follow great ideas but rather to live from the mystery of the Incarnation, this mystery so dear to Saint Vincent de Paul, the mystery of this God Who lowered Himself by becoming man, Who lived among us and died to elevate man and to save him. These are not simply fine words, but rather the very being and action of God. It is to this reality that we are called to live as a Church. This is why human development, the authentic liberation of man, does not exist without the proclamation of the Gospel “for the most sublime aspect of human dignity lies in this vocation of man to communicate with God.”

In the Bull for the opening of the Jubilee Year, I expressed my hope 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!” (5). I invite you to follow this path. The credibility of the Church pursues the way of merciful love and compassion that is open to hope. This credibility also depends upon your personal witness: it is not merely a question of encountering Christ in the poor, but also of the poor perceiving Christ in you and in your action. By being rooted in Christ’s personal experience you can contribute to a “culture of mercy” that profoundly renews hearts and opens them up to a new reality.

Finally, I would like to invite you to contemplate the charism of Saint Louise de Marillac, to whom Monsieur Vincent entrusted the inspiration and coordination of the Charities, and to find in her the finesse and gentleness of mercy that never hurts or humiliates anyone, but instead raises up, restoring courage and hope.

By entrusting you to the intercession of the Virgin Mary and to the protection of Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac, I impart to you my Apostolic Blessing and ask you to pray for me.

Francis

Mass for the 400th Anniversary of the Teams of Saint Vincent « AIC-France »

Bertrand Ponsard, CM

It was on 8th March 2017, International Women's Day, that the teams of Saint Vincent, AIC France, gathered at Notre-Dame de Paris in order to celebrate 400 years of the Confraternities of Charity. It was an exceptional day and the AIC filled the nave of the immense cathedral. And how could one not make a link with all those generations who, for more than 800 years, prayed and continue to pray under that vault, built with such genius!

We had more than 30 priests and brothers come to join us in thanksgiving for the work undertaken by Saint Vincent with a handful of energetic and committed women. Welcomed by the Vicar General of the diocese, Msgr. Benoist de Sinety, we entered in procession, following the heart of Saint Vincent de Paul.

During the Mass, we were to hear the story of the *inhabitants of Niniveh who converted in response to Jonah's proclamation*. Then followed the Gospel in which Christ shows that he is even greater than Jonah, the Christ who indicates the urgency of conversion. Now the sign offered to humanity is no longer the preaching of Jonah but the Resurrection of Christ on the third day after his death! It is a sign of hope given in faith by the mercy of God. When the King of Niniveh asks him: who knows if God will not rethink himself, if he does not return to the fire of his anger? God responds in his charity, renouncing all chastisement, through Christ, and reveals that his is the God of tenderness and mercy. A God who desires only our Good, a God who is close to every human being, in order to save humanity.

The sign of the Cross, sign of Charity, becomes, therefore, the unique sign of conversion which allows humanity to escape the judgement which is to come. How? By entering into the Charity of Christ, who has come to save that which was lost. To love the neighbor as He has loved us is to preach, to this wicked generation, like our own, the means of conversion. The saints have shown one and the same Charity which finds its source in God. In the same way that Christ allowed his heart to be pierced, the saints practiced love for their sisters and brothers, right to the end. Saint Vincent and Saint Louise are privileged witnesses of this love.

It is now already 400 years since, having discovered the works of spiritual mercy, at Folleville, Monsieur Vincent, deeply moved, changed his life. He left for Châtillon-des-Dombes (today called Châtillon-sur-Chalaronne). One Sunday, someone alerted him to the needs of a family, all of whose members were ill. He preached and touched hearts, to encourage the parishioners to come to their aid. It was a success and a veritable procession set off. But what would they do in the following days? It was vital to organize. And with women who volunteered and were moved by compassion, women of faith who desired to act, he created the first Confraternity of Charity. On the 8th of December, feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary, the first Charity received its rules. The Virgin Mary was proposed as model and protectrix of this women's charity! Mary is the woman who watches over suffering humanity and manifests still and always her maternal vocation.

The work had begun. Later, at each mission given in a parish by the Lazarist priests and brothers, a Charity was established. Today, the International Association of Charity (AIC) acts as it has done since that first day! Let us recall that there are almost 150,000 teams in the world. But what do numbers matter? What matters most is heart, and an effective organisation that loves the neighbour truly and facilitates the conditions for the integral development of each person met. We might say with the team-members of France; *Change the world; women are doing it!*

To sum up the sense of the celebration: while we might be a wicked generation, God gives us signs of his mercy and calls us to conversion; let us love as best we can for *mercy does not fear judgement*.

The celebration ended with a procession to place the heart of Saint Vincent in the chapel in the cathedral which is dedicated to him. Afterwards, team-members and their hosts set off on the *bateaux-mouches*! For many, this was a first in their lives. Then, everyone met up at the Maison-Mère of the Lazaristes, 95 rue de Sèvres, Paris. There, light refreshments were served by the young people from Ecole d'Application Albert de Mun. Many spoke of thanksgiving, the unveiling of the magnificent tapestry made by the hosts, the well-wishers and the team-members. Most noteworthy were those women who had participated from their jail! There was also an exhibition of photographs. In short, it was a beautiful, full day, and then everyone departed for home, but not without telling us how happy each had been to be welcomed so warmly by the community of the Lazarists.

Translated by John E. Rybolt, CM