

In the Footsteps of Vincent de Paul

Pedro Opeka, CM

In this prestigious place that today is the European Union, we would like to give witness to the spiritual strength of Saint Vincent de Paul and his unique charism. His commitment, his ideas and loving actions in service of the poorest have long since crossed the borders of France to spread to all parts of the world in more than 100 countries. Saint Vincent is an idea that has been transformed into action in the service of humanity. He also deserves a hearing in this place for international dialogue among nations.

With great joy we are celebrating the 400th anniversary of when Saint Vincent de Paul first decided to provide effective charity towards our neighbors. At Châtillon-sur-Chalaronne, in 1617, just at the moment of celebrating the Eucharist, Vincent was faced with the dramatic case of a family where all members were sick. He understood at that moment that he could not celebrate Mass without going first to those poor people who were waiting for immediate help.

What did he do? He asked those ladies who were around him at that moment to bring help to this family while he was celebrating Mass.

Thus was born his first work of charity, one could say his first social work. This was achieved thanks to the acceptance of those ladies of good will, willing to accept their responsibility to be human and Christian.

Saint Vincent de Paul, like all great saints, was a man like everyone else. He had to make a choice at one point in his life, a categorical choice to live and act in accord with the faith that he was preaching to others.

Thus, this charism began in Châtillon. There the grain was planted, and it would continue to grow in the most beautiful way throughout Vincent's life.

We know what happened: Monsieur Vincent, as he is called, would by this incredible charism, help to produce the vocation of numerous lay men and women, ready to go to the aid of the poor. All the poor without distinction: those he found in his journey and those who were sent to him. After this mission with the laity, the task was not finished; and it would never be! He then began to gather priests, those who want to follow in this venture, the most beautiful and noble that ever existed: approaching the poor, with a gentle hand, lifting them up, loving them. I will not dwell on the long list of accomplishments of St. Vincent's life. Those little flowers, we know them. Their story is well known from the moment biographers and scholars have lifted all the many veils from that life! I would like, as far as I am concerned, having been a Vincentian missionary in Madagascar since 1970, to evoke this charism of St. Vincent de Paul, which we have, whether we are Vincentian missionaries or from other congregations, wanting to live with the poorest of our brothers and sisters in Madagascar. Many other missionaries around the world could also tell their story, rich in teachings for all of us. As for me, I've no other testimony than to speak of the commitment of Vincentian priests and Daughters of Charity, and of all those of the Vincentian family in Madagascar.

St. Vincent de Paul, throughout his life, had dreamed of sending his first missionaries to Madagascar. Beyond having dreamed it, he actually realized it when the first heroic missionaries Father Nacquart and Father Gondrée, arrived in 1648 at Fort Dauphin, to the south of the great island.

This mission that St. Vincent carried in his heart, we know how difficult it was, because of the climate and malaria that decimated the missionaries during those 25 years of that mission in the seventeenth

century. Truly, we need to pay homage to these first Vincentian missionaries who left knowing that they would be making a journey with no hope of returning. But they left their country just the same because they carried the Gospel of Jesus in their hearts. They wanted to share this Gospel with the poorest of Madagascar and they wanted to live out St Vincent de Paul's charism with unlimited love for the poorest, with the deepest respect, imbued with a humble and simple approachability, so that it would be God's love and grace being shown to them first of all.

We are today the heirs of that mission begun in 1648. Afterwards, the presence of missionaries of St. Vincent de Paul was interrupted for more than two centuries (1675-1895).

The return in 1896 of the priests, brothers and Daughters of St. Vincent de Paul was a new challenge that was taken on with much courage and faith. The southern part of Madagascar had been entrusted to the congregation of St. Vincent de Paul for spiritual animation and to create several dioceses: Fort Dauphin, Farafangana, Ihosy, Tulear and Merobe.

The missionary priests and the Daughters of Charity worked there with love, self-denial and faith. They lived alongside the people, experiencing all the ills suffered by the Malagasy men and women, malaria, schistosomiasis, parasitosis, and tuberculosis. They also lived with a modest diet and with few possessions, just like the people to whom they consecrated their lives.

This presence of missionaries of St. Vincent de Paul was of decisive importance for the development of southern Madagascar, even as this region remained the most underdeveloped, brought on by periodic famines due to the hostility of its climate, lack of rain and drinking water and even basic infrastructure. For example, no asphalt roads ever created any access to the south, and so the south has always lived in isolation, split from the center of the island, which even to our time has always been more fortunate.

With their good will, and from all points of view, the missionary priests and the Daughters of Charity did everything anyone could do in this hostile region.

One of their great difficulties turned out to be how to approach the tribes of this region. It became necessary to help these tribes to understand that a new era was beginning, that they needed to respond to the needs of their infants, and to those of all their young people, to make them aware that some of their ancestral superstitions and customs were paralyzing their own development.

Of course, over all these years, the missionaries willingly immersed themselves, body and soul, into this rich Malagasy culture of solidarity and care for each other, but they also dared to tell their Malagasy brothers that any tribe, any people, should be open to a better future. One of the many challenges of the suffering in this area and throughout the south of Madagascar was premature death, not only of infants, but also of mothers and fathers.

In 1970, when I arrived in Madagascar, the inhabitants' median age was 42 years. This was due to a mismanaged response to fundamental health problems, due to the fact that many of their children had never been vaccinated; as a result, they were being decimated by disease. In addition there were epidemics caused by drinking contaminated water.

Today, I would like to pay tribute to all those missionaries who, although they had access only to the limited means of their time, but, motivated by their faith and love, went there to help their Malagasy brothers and sisters and to sing along with them the praises of the loving God. Unfortunately they were less "armed" when it came to doing something for them, to dealing with problems of malnutrition, chronic diseases such as diarrhea, tuberculosis or malaria.

Those elder missionaries, our forerunners, visited the villages in the jungle most of the time on foot, like everyone else, or in a

dugout canoe. It brought them closer to the people, helped them to be heard, to understand the people and to love them. These people, our brothers and sisters, came to see in these priests and religious, even if they were of foreign origin, the announcement of progress, of an evolution, of a form of brotherhood that they had not known until then.

The missionaries, after having just arrived in their hamlet, were asked to teach them how to pray, to take care of themselves, and to instruct their children, for these Malagasy brothers and sisters nurtured a deep and sometimes secret desire to have nurseries run by nuns and a school to teach their children how to read and write.

The Experience of Akamasoa

After paying tribute to all these courageous missionaries, I would like to mention the experience we started 27 years ago in Antananarivo. When I was appointed by my congregation to be the director of the Scholasticate of St Vincent de Paul in Soavimbahoka, I had the responsibility of accompanying and training some fifteen young postulants for priesthood for our congregation in Madagascar. The poverty I saw at Tana upset me. I could not believe my eyes.

And it was then that I sincerely proposed to our future priests of St Vincent de Paul to begin to live without any further delay, during the next 10 years of formation, the charism of St. Vincent de Paul, to see in every poor person the face of Christ. We could not have learned this in books nor in philosophy courses by the faculty, but only with real and concrete contact with the poor who surrounded us.

One day, to my horror, I discovered the dump where so many children and poor families were trying to survive by sorting garbage and rubbish from the city. In the same way, it was unbearable to see them survive in these makeshift shelters in which they were piled with their children. It was unbearable to accept the tragedy of all

these forgotten and excluded families. It was from this electroshock that I wanted to respond with concrete action to help these families get out of this misery.

I talked with some young lay people I knew in Madagascar, with whom I gathered regularly, and who were studying at the university. I also asked our seminarians to attend their meetings on Saturdays and Sundays and to visit with us those people who were suffering right under our noses: those poorest of the poor, those forgotten people, excluded from any society, the ragpickers who lived along the railways in the city center, the families who survived around the landfill at Andralanitra.

Without money, with no logistical support of any kind, nor international aid, but with passion and the conviction that poverty is not inevitable, we began step by step to build our plan on how to fight against this extreme poverty with extreme simplicity, which obviously surprised more than one of the famous experts of integral development.

We began this experience with no money, without any means, but with only the faith and conviction that God does not forget his children and the poorest families.

As a priest of the Congregation of St. Vincent de Paul, it was my simple human and spiritual duty and the call of my faith to reach out to those people who were excluded, who were from the streets and the dumps, to improve their lives and offer them a little hope and friendship. This is where we started this service, one that eventually became integral development, since integral development was necessary to meet the different needs of their lives.

We started with one home dedicated for the homeless. Secondly, we constructed some dwellings a bit more worthy than the fragile hovels where they once lived in the street, a kind of first aid for an already very fragile population, and then we guaranteed a minimum

grant of one daily meal for the children. We also began to create jobs for parents, since from the beginning we had been clear about this community venture, saying that we would never be reduced to depending on charity (handouts), but that we would get up and start a more dignified life through work, school and internal rules of conduct, a sort of community discipline to learn to live together without violence.

We opened a granite quarry where hundreds of workers began to tackle the mountain. For children, we built classrooms so that we could begin to educate them.

At the same time, we tackled the development of our land by constructing new housing, as it was the most urgent need, along with a health center and a dispensary. Also, we started to drill wells and began a drinking water distribution network by building fountain posts (spigots), which are valuable guarantees for good health. We have also started sanitation work through the creation of access roads, gutters for sewage and rainwater, and the construction of hundreds of latrines to improve hygiene and sanitation.

Meanwhile, along with our school children, we started planting trees on a deserted hill.

We immediately sensitized children towards respect of the environment, to the love of trees and flowers.

In a city where insecurity had increased yearly, we were also obliged to form our own security groups to keep watch over the extent of all our villages. We were attacked three times with weapons of war.

Today, for our 13,500 schoolchildren, uprooted from the streets and from a landfill, we have been led to build sports facilities that also benefit many children in state schools and private schools in the area.

We have also created places of prayer and recollection. At these sites we sponsor recollection for groups of young people or for whole parishes who ask us, especially for the periods before Christmas and Easter, to use these beautiful places which are in the heights of Akamasoa.

That's not all. Our dead have not been forgotten. We have built four cemeteries because death is very present among this poor and fragile population. Burying the poor with love, with respect and according to the culture of their ancestors, has nourished confidence in this venture to get out of misery .

All these projects were accomplished at the same time. Is it possible to separate the life of a person into small pieces? The human body and the spirit that inhabits it are one. Thus, in the process of taking care of their bodies, they were more receptive to the human, spiritual and ancestral wisdom that we shared with them.

In Madagascar there is this proverb both deep and very strong: "The spirit makes the person." This proverb is written in granite stone in the courtyard where I live, very close to the chapel where prayer takes place every evening in the company of many children.

Never have we forgotten either the body or the mind. About all these works and these efforts, there are many books that can speak with more precision. But today I would like to ask you and all our Vincentian family around the world, "What are the challenges that we have yet to face today, where must we learn to listen to the poorest, to discover the new faces, to identify the new poor in each of the countries where we live?"

Perhaps we all should start by looking at the situation of the injustices that throw millions into poverty.

Then, we should seek to understand the causes of these injustices in order to clearly identify which solutions need to be implemented. And finally, we should decide to act to change the structures and

systems that have produced this misery. This is where our Community has made a major contribution with its Commission on Systemic Change.

We also need to think about the challenge that the millions of children forgotten on the streets of big cities around the world are facing.

We must also choose to reflect on the lack of respect and dignity towards women in many countries in our world. Women are always exploited and oppressed, yet it is often the woman who is the first force in the family to educate, to change their way of thinking and to get them out of poverty.

We must also humanize these places of suffering where people have lost their spirit, since drugs, prostitution and alcohol, are pitiless prisons that murder the soul. Humanizing these places of despair is proving so difficult and we feel so often disarmed, and helpless. But as Christians, as members of the family of St. Vincent de Paul, with the Gospel in our hand, we should never give in to panic, despair or helplessness. The spirit of Christ who lived in St Vincent de Paul will speak to us and will always awaken us to our responsibilities.

These are the new orientations and suggestions provided by the last General Assembly in July 2016 in Chicago with the election of our new Superior General, who from the outset has invited us to follow the charism of St Vincent de Paul and St Louise de Marillac.

Creating oases of hope is perhaps the first approach to a global solution to misery and despair because you will never be able to change everything right away on the scale of a large city or for any society. But we can create these little oases where people can find dignity, joy in truth, justice and brotherhood.

Because of this cultural upheaval and the unprecedented speed of scientific and technological progress that jostle and sometimes disorient us, we must unite, respond together as a family, the

Vincentian family, seeking first meaning in our own lives, identifying concrete objectives, then carrying out the initiatives and actions that immediately can serve the poor and also the youth of our time. To do this, we must draw from the Gospel and from spirituality and from concrete actions of St Vincent de Paul. Today we have much more knowledge in every field than did our predecessors. We also have more freedom of action than in the past and many more ways of approaching, listening and helping those who are outside the wider human community like drug addicts, prostitutes, terrorists from all sides, all the living wounded people, and some who have lost everything.

In the face of this enormous challenge, we must certainly think together, that is to say, to unite, while avoiding falling into the impasse of “endless meetings”, which hamper the commitment and the concrete decisions and effectiveness for those who need us in order to help them get out of their extreme poverty. As for me, I can say without error: my office is the street! Wherever I meet a poor person, I can and I must find the right solution on the spot.

Every action decided upon in common must immediately be followed by an effect which is translated into real life. How is it possible that so many well-ordered reports, presented in a perfectly accepted vocabulary, end up in a drawer? The truth is that, despite what some dare to affirm, poverty does not retreat; on the contrary, it is advancing as well in the towns as in the countryside. We know the enormous waves of poverty ravaging the entire planet: sick, hungry and uneducated children; parents completely disoriented and unemployed, without the least security to ensure the lives of their children; the abandoned old expect only one thing: a death that delivers them.

Let's take stock and face reality. There is a huge gulf between people struggling on the ground against poverty and those watching it all in their offices... from afar. This gap is the gap between those

who, day by day, are working with the poor on the ground and those in their offices compiling figures and providing guidance and direction. Can this abyss ever be filled? With all my strength and with all my soul, I want to believe it but I also know that it will be very difficult. I am certain about one thing: this chasm can never be filled if we, Vincentian priests and brothers, Daughters of Charity and the Vincentian Family, do not take the initiative to upset the ideas, the lines and the concepts of the bureaucrats and the technocrats.

Yes, I say that now we, with the greatest strength of mind, heart and spirit, must shake up those old beautiful ideas about poverty and development.

We do not pretend to eliminate this sickly inertia. Yet, we, the Vincentian family, drawing from the message and deeds of such a pragmatic, realistic and effective Saint, are the first to be able to do more, as St. Vincent de Paul said. We are led to proclaim the Gospel to the poorest and in an effective way. This is perhaps the new evangelization of which we speak so much. The gospel is not the property of the baptized. There are people of goodwill, believers and unbelievers all over the world, and there are also so many eminent personalities from other religions in the world who struggle and share these values for the defense of human dignity. We all need to work together.

As a Vincentian family, in the name of Christ and our particular charism, according to the talents of each of our branches and of each one of us, we have a duty to interfere in the spheres that affect the lives of the poor, either in economic policy or in the most basic social problems. We have no right to remain silent. We would be accomplices. We must also question the reasons for the persistence and worsening of poverty in most of our continents. We should with all our might oppose the resignation of every poor man, because such giving up is the most insidious temptation to which a poor person succumbs, caused by the lack of human, friendly and fraternal

contact. This is how he sinks deeper into misery. We all have in our memories the recommendations of Pope Francis who invites us to get involved in the margins of our societies.

Dear brothers and sisters, I believe that it is urgent that we have words and constructive actions that go beyond our respective missions on the ground in order to bring the good news to the attention of economic, social and political leaders who, by their indifference, inaction and slowness, threaten our time with enormous human catastrophes.

In conclusion, to work together we must be imbued with the brotherly love of Christ who desired that we all be brothers and sisters and that our love, humility, and fraternal friendship speak out to the world. After all, we do belong to the same human and spiritual family: that of St Vincent de Paul.

This saint, now 400 years old, was already in his own time a revolutionary pioneer for justice; he did it through work and prayer.

Translated: Dan Paul Borlik CM