

The 400th Anniversary of the Birth of the Vincentian Charism: Celebrations, Projects, and Dreams

Joseph V. Agostino, CM
Coordinator, Vincentian Family Office

When a dream captures the imagination of people, it develops wings and soars to unimagined heights. This has been the experience of the Vincentian Family during this Jubilee Year. Almost anywhere you go in the Vincentian world, you see the symbol of the Anniversary. Most publications you read from a Vincentian source feature it, or some creative variation of it, which speaks to a particular locale. Articles have been written which have invited both a thankful glance back and a hope-filled vision of the future. The Family has gathered to celebrate this once-in-a-lifetime moment, in some places more than once! Most importantly, Vincentians have examined how they serve the poor and have developed new ways to “welcome the stranger” in their midst.

“I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matthew 25:35). These words have resounded throughout the 150 countries in which the Vincentian Family is found. They are a counter-cultural call to focus again our Vincentian mission on the most abandoned in every society on the planet, in the spirit of our Founder. As Saint Vincent said to his confreres, we are “to run to the spiritual needs of our neighbor as if we were running to a fire.”¹

¹ *Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, translated and edited by Jacqueline Kilar, DC; and Marie Poole, DC; et al; annotated by John W. Carven, CM; New City Press, Brooklyn and Hyde Park, 1985-2014; volume XI, p. 25.

This is a year of renewal for our ministries. As members of the Vincentian Family, we witness to the heritage that has been entrusted to over 100 branches of our Family to collaborate for Systemic Change on behalf of those affected by poverty. This is a time of blessing for the whole Vincentian Family. It provides us with the opportunity to renew our missionary zeal and to become more mindful of the social context and the urgent needs of those who are poor, as well as our own ability to respond to those needs as a Vincentian Family.

There are some outstanding examples of the impact of this celebration thus far. The Vincentian Family in Brazil wrote an open letter condemning the corruption that is currently destroying the social fabric of its country. The Vincentian Family in India has decided to build homes for the homeless in every region of its country. The Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill in South Korea have begun new ministries focused on supporting North Korean refugees. In Haiti, the Vincentian Family's Haiti Initiative has been joined by the Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity (STs), who have initially committed two priests to this collaborative effort. Thus, the Family continues to respond to the call of the Charism in our own time.

To mark this occasion on an international level, the Vincentian Family has begun four initiatives that will shape the direction in which we will grow for many years to come.

A Pilgrimage with the Heart of Saint Vincent inaugurated our celebration of this Jubilee Year.

The heart of Saint Vincent de Paul was removed from his body immediately after his death. For many years, it could be venerated at an altar in his honor in the Chapel of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal in the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity on Rue du Bac, Paris, France.

On 25 January 2017, Saint Vincent's heart traveled from there, in a newly forged Reliquary, to Folleville, where the Anniversary was inaugurated officially. From there, it is traveling throughout France until January 2018.

There have been many powerful testimonies arising from this pilgrimage experience. The presence of the heart of Saint Vincent has moved hearts to confide, to share, and to rediscover faith. Young and old, those actively serving the poor and those being served, the faithful and even those who have been alienated from God or the Church, have had their lives changed. These miracle stories can be read on the FamVin website.

Over the next four years, Saint Vincent's heart is scheduled to travel throughout the rest of Europe. After that, it will be on pilgrimage throughout the world. Priority will be given to the peripheries, those areas closest to the heart of Vincent in his lifetime. Special preference will be given to those places where poverty is rampant.

A new Vincentian Family Project for the Jubilee Year: the Homeless Alliance is the second project we are undertaking.

On 28 June 2017, at the European Parliament in Brussels, we announced this Alliance on behalf of the homeless. This project coincides with the Sustainable Development Objectives of the United Nations. It is a project in which all of the branches of the Vincentian Family, as well as every individual in it, can participate.

The project encompasses:

- a) People who are homeless (e.g., indigent individuals and/or people who sleep on the streets),
- b) People who have temporary housing (e.g., refugee centers and people who have been displaced from their homes and have no place to live), and

- c) People who are in inadequate living conditions (e.g., marginalized neighborhoods, favelas, hostels, etc.).

The most recent reports on this topic from the United Nations suggest that, of the seven billion people on this planet, more than 1.2 billion fall within this three-tiered definition of global homelessness. It is one of the great social ills of our time. The Alliance will involve both immediate holistic care for those suffering homelessness and a campaign for systemic change in the way that homelessness is tackled at a local, regional, and global level.

The formal beginning of the Alliance is scheduled for Saturday, 14 October 2017, at the next major initiative planned for this year, the *Vincentian Family Symposium*.

This will take place in Rome, Italy, on 12-15 October 2017. Over the course of those days, many events are scheduled:

- a) Prayer Service in honor of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, on Thursday night, 12 October, at the church in which Mary appeared to Alphonse Ratisbonne, the Basilica of Sant'Andrea delle Fratte. This service is being organized by the International Association of the Miraculous Medal.
- b) On Friday, 13 October, conferences will be offered in six languages in churches around the Vatican. They are designed to help us further develop the essential elements of the Charism for the immediate future. We will have conversations around spirituality, formation, and the changing face of our services in response to the cries of those in poverty in today's world.

On Friday afternoon, there will be a special program offered for consecrated youth. It will be a unique opportunity for all young men and women in formation processes in all the branches of the Vincentian Family to meet one another and grow in their appreciation of the richness and depth of our shared charism.

On Friday evening, all the youth participating in the Symposium are invited to a special evening designed just for them. This celebration will continue what was begun at World Youth Day in Krakow, as they gather to honor Saint Vincent de Paul, Patron of Europe, and to be animated in their own Vincentian vocation.

Friday's special gatherings for youth touch upon another major theme of this Jubilee Year: vocations to the Vincentian Family. Father Tomaž Mavrič, CM, in his letter of 25 January 2017, set before the Vincentian Family one concrete goal: "to pray, be attentive, look for, encourage, and invite one new candidate to the consecrated life for one of the Congregations within the Vincentian Family or to join one of its lay branches as a member. Is this unrealistic? Is this a fantasy? With Jesus all is possible!"

- c) On Saturday morning, 14 October, we will gather in the Paul VI Audience Hall in the Vatican. There we will witness the formal beginning of the Vincentian Family Homeless Alliance. The upcoming Vincentian Family Film Festival will also be announced.

The highlight of the morning will be an audience with Pope Francis. The relic of the heart of Saint Vincent, which has begun its worldwide pilgrimage, will also be present with us.

- d) On Saturday evening, we will celebrate a Prayer Service in the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside-the-Walls. This service is being organized by the International Secretariat of the Vincentian Marian Youth.
- e) Our Symposium comes to an end on Sunday morning, 15 October, with a closing Eucharist in the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside-the-Walls. Father Tomaž Mavrič, CM, the 24th successor of Saint Vincent de Paul will be our celebrant and preacher.

The final initiative of this Jubilee Year, which is being announced at the Symposium, is a *Vincentian Family Film Festival*.

This international film festival, “*FindingVince400*” focuses on the life of Saint Vincent de Paul and highlights his love of those in poverty. It will include a call for both scripts and short films that emphasize his vision for the globalization of charity. The schedule for each stage of the process will be announced in Rome. All are invited to participate: universities, young men and women, adults, people from every continent.

This initiative will culminate with a film festival exposition scheduled for 18-20 October 2018 in Mariapolis at Castle Gandolfo, outside of Rome, Italy.

As I write this, we are barely half-way through the celebration of our Jubilee Year. So much has happened; so much is yet to come. Can we say that there are some things which we have already learned? I would like to offer some reflections.

The enthusiasm with which the Symposium has been received (over 9,000 people registered as of 10 September 2017) is a sign of the influence that the Vincentian Charism has on us to this day. The energy shown, especially by lay members of the Family, whether or not they belong to an official Vincentian Family Branch, is indicative of its ability to enflame the hearts of people with zeal for service on behalf of those most in need.

This reality underscores our need to do as Vincent did – to make sure this spirit is organized in the most effective way possible for the sake of those whom we serve. Collaboration for Systemic Change remains a great challenge for all of us, but it is the only way in which we will effectively see a true globalization of charity.

This reality also highlights the need for good formation in the Charism across all the Branches of the Vincentian Family. We need to know why we do what we do, as well as how to do it effectively. Most importantly, we need to be grounded in the Gospel of Jesus, as was Vincent, so that all our actions are led by the Spirit and bear fruit in the lives of our Lords and Masters.

Finally, we need to communicate even better. God is blessing us! When we see and hear of all the wonderful things that are happening in our Family, there can be no doubt that the Spirit is at work among us. Blessings are given to be shared. We need to praise God for these blessings by not keeping them a secret! We owe it to one another, as members of one Body and one Family, to communicate what is happening in our lives of service to those living on the peripheries. Such communication is also a sign of our appreciation for the gifts we have been given. May we be grateful disciples of the Lord and followers of Vincent.

The celebration of our Jubilee Year has only just begun. The directions in which we are embarking will have great influence in the years that lie ahead. That is the beautiful thing about our Charism. As we keep our eyes fixed on the Lord and his poor, we are called to be creative in our response, ever listening to the Spirit and the signs of the time, and free to respond as true missionaries, always moving to the peripheries to which we are beckoned.