

March 30, 2000

To the members of the Vincentian Family

Dear brothers and sisters,

May the grace of Our Lord be always with you.

Today, I would like to speak with you about the presence and apostolic commitment of the Vincentian Family in the Moslem world.

Moslems represent more than one billion people throughout the world. They live not only in countries traditionally called Islamic but are also a significant presence in areas with a Christian tradition. Contemporary society is increasingly multicultural and multireligious. This can be a rich experience for us, or it can pose a threat to political stability and to religious groups. The Vincentian Family is present in a large number of countries where Islam is in the majority or where it has many followers.

The Islam that we encounter is simultaneously both unified and diversified. A simple glance at a map will show its sociological and cultural diversity from Morocco to Indonesia. This diversity is also seen within Moslem societies themselves, going so far as to give rise, at times, to grave internal conflicts. In some areas, relations with other religious bodies have taken an aggressive turn. Nevertheless, the violence and intolerance experienced in too many places should not conceal from us the reality of a significant number of believers who live their religion in peace and respect for others.

This Islamic reality, which encompasses not only the religious life of individuals but the whole complex of their social life, cannot leave us indifferent. It is, in fact, one of the most important challenges for the Church and society in many countries. Could our religious communities and societies not find ways to live in peace and collaborate sincerely? Would true religious liberty not be possible in every country? Will the disciples of Christ be able to proclaim the Good News while respecting the consciences of others, and, even more, will they, in their relations with others, live what they proclaim, despite difficulties? Can they expect, at the same time, that the disciples of Mohammed will be increasingly concerned about promoting respectful, fraternal attitudes toward those who do not share their faith?

From July 26 to August 2, 1999, in Fatqa, Lebanon, about one hundred Vincentian confreres and Daughters of Charity, along with several lay members of the Vincentian Family from many countries of the world, took time to discuss these issues. Several specialists in Moslem-Christian relations joined them in their reflections. I invite you to read the texts coming from this meeting; the conferences and individual testimonies have been published in *Vincentiana* (n° 4/5 – July-October 1999).

This Vincentian meeting was the occasion both for a fruitful exchange of experiences and for reflection on the motives underlying our presence and mission among Moslems. It also evoked a greater awareness of St. Vincent's interest in the world of Islam, a world he knew personally. This interest, as many remarked, was based above all else on his sense of the universal mission of a Church that knows no boundaries and from which none can be excluded.

Our Vincentian spirituality can help us see Moslems in a new way, while realistically acknowledging the difficulties, often tragic, unfolding in certain countries. It will be useful for us to refocus on St. Vincent's way of looking at the individual person. A spirit of dialogue is part of his heritage, as well as a spirit of seeking reconciliation between individuals and among human communities. A deep attitude of humility can help us discern patiently and prudently the values that others hold, values sometimes expressed in surprising ways.

Now, as a consequence of this session, I want to encourage the Vincentian Family to move forward energetically in making contact with the followers of Islam and to witness among them to the spirit of the Gospel. I suggest that in the years ahead we engage in a deeper examination of the meaning of the Church's mission among Moslems and become involved in it more actively.

By such study and by simple presence, we can grow in knowledge of Islam and the Church's teaching about interreligious dialogue, especially as it relates to Moslems. It will also be important for us to foster a basic understanding of Islam, especially in our houses of initial formation and in our ongoing formation. The Congregation should also form some experts in Islam and interreligious dialogue.

Above all, we should make it our concern to enter into personal contact with Moslems, working with them in areas common to us, such as the service of the poor, the struggle for justice, and respect for human dignity. Through high-quality meetings, shared life experiences and common work, prejudices will be overcome, and it will become possible to open channels of mutual respect and reconciliation, and to build peace and brotherhood in the human family.

In our work among Christians living among Moslems, I hope that we can offer information and insight into how they might work toward reconciliation among groups and individuals, and that we can contribute toward strengthening the faith of those who live in rather difficult situations by helping them live in a spirit of evangelical openness.

St. Vincent told us that love is inventive. So we should look for concrete ways to go out to men and women who do not share our faith, something which has been a part of our charism from the beginning. For centuries, the Vincentian Family has had a remarkable commitment to education and culture in many countries with an Islamic tradition. I am eager that we would continue this commitment today and broaden it to

promote fraternal dialogue among all believers and people of good will, as the teaching of the Church since the Second Vatican Council invites us to do.

May St. Vincent help us to pursue his work in a spirit of universal brotherhood, and of openness to the action of the Holy Spirit in every human heart!

Your brother in St. Vincent,

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.
Superior General