

The Season of Advent, 2011



*“The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness has not overcome it.”*

(John 1:5)

To all members of the Vincentian Family

May the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ fill your hearts now and forever!

The above scripture, taken from St. John’s Gospel, is an appropriate way to begin our Advent reflection. At this time of year, much of the world moves from long, bright days to shorter, darker times. The year’s end approaches, giving us pause to reflect not just on what has passed, but on what lies ahead for us. The reality of change is palpable both in the weather and on the calendar, but also deep within the horizon of our hearts.

That is why, I believe, the Church gives us Advent: in seasons of change, it reminds us of God’s enduring love. Through the incarnation of Jesus, God assures us of his abiding presence in our world. In Jesus, we have a God who always accompanies us in times of light and darkness, in the settled center and uncertain edges of our lives. Yet, it is on the edge, the “outer limits” of life, that the Lord Jesus is often revealed to us.

The Advent stories show us lives lived on the edge: Mary’s stunning annunciation to be mother of the Lord; Joseph’s noble struggle to

accept this awesome reality; Jesus' birth in the simplicity of the stable; the shepherds' humble homage; the sudden uprooting of the Holy Family to escape the wrath of Herod's hands; all these Advent stories show us a God, though centered in Trinitarian love, who "emptied himself" (Phil 2:7), by becoming human. In choosing to live at the edge, Jesus ushered in the Reign of God, and paradoxically drew us closer to the center point of God's love.

As Superior General, I have the privilege and responsibility of visiting with my Vincentian confreres, the Daughters of Charity, and members of the Vincentian family world-wide to spread the charism of St. Vincent de Paul. When doing this, I offer my support and encouragement to those who leave their safe, secure world to go to the edge and outer limits and serve the poor. I am edified by so many of my confreres, Daughters of Charity, and Vincentian Family members who courageously enter the world's dark corners to illuminate them with the light of Christ. Let me share some examples to illustrate how they live the Advent journey of light and hope.

In the Republic of Chad, one of Africa's poorest countries, Daughters of Charity from Spain serving with Vincentians from Cameroon, Madagascar, and Nigeria work in a remote, rural area without any Church presence. Their "mission church" is a wooden stage with a makeshift tent, protected by large mango trees. In this neglected region, they bring Jesus and our charism to a people whose hunger and thirst is satisfied by the Word of God and the charity of Christ.

In the United Kingdom, I met with Vincentians in Partnership, a coalition of service providers for the poor made up of ten core and thirteen affiliated groups. We prayed, reflected, and discussed ways to imbibe and impart the Vincentian charism of love of God and service to the poor. Their work is with the urban poor, homeless youth, mentally ill, and addicted; in short, those on the margins of society. Their reach of care and compassion goes beyond their borders to Ireland, Eastern Europe and the USA. A descriptive website tells their story: <http://www.vip-gb.org>

After an eight-hour flight from Moscow, I arrived in Magadan Russia, a place which seemed to be geographically at the end of the earth. This mission is staffed by Daughters of Charity from the USA and Poland. Once in Magadan, I was transported into a forgotten world of closed prison camps, meeting people who were subject to decades of inhumane treatment. In the Stalin era, Magadan was the final stop for hundreds of thousands of Soviet citizens, labeled "enemies of the people."

The Daughters accompany the survivors (called "the repressed") of the prison camps, assisting in their healing by helping them to "tell their stories." Along with the presence of the region's only Catho-

lic Church, these former prisoners now have a welcoming community of faith. The beauty of the Church of the Nativity with its Martyr's Chapel, which honors untold numbers of people who perished in prison camps, and actual stories of surviving prisoners, can be seen on their web site: <http://magadancatholic.org>

Each of these three experiences – Chad, Vincentians in Partnership, and Magadan – hold a place in my heart as we celebrate the season of Advent. They remind us that the light of Christ overcame the darkness of a world filled with sin and suffering. The four Advent Sunday Gospels all help us focus on what is essential for Christian discipleship: being “watchful for Christ” (Mk 13:33); “preparing the way of the Lord” (Mk 1:2); trusting that “nothing is impossible for God” (Lk 1:35); and “testifying to the light” (Jn 1:7). Taken together, these Gospel stories provide a formula for putting faith into action all year long.

This Advent way, a watchful, willing, trusting, and testifying gospel faith, was pivotal in the life of St. Vincent de Paul, who found Christ where he least expected: on the edge, the “outer limits” of life. In his two pivotal conversion experiences; hearing the confession of a sick man, and successfully exhorting his flock to provide food and medicine for a desperately ill family; both experiences led Vincent to Christ in the poor. Once he entered the world of the poor, it transformed his life. From that time on, he organized and inspired his followers to do the same:

“Do not limit your vision any longer to yourself, but see the Lord around you and in you, ready to put his hand to the work as soon as you ask for his help. You will see that all will go well” (SV, V, 488, 1655 - English Edition).

As we prepare heart and home for the Christmas coming of the Lord, let the words of Jesus and the charism of St. Vincent de Paul resonate more deeply in your hearts and lives. The Advent and Christmas stories vividly remind us of One who was born, lived, and died on the “edge.” John’s Gospel poignantly reminds us that Jesus “came to his own and his own did not receive him” (Jn 1:10). This was true for the Holy Family. Often portrayed in paintings and holy cards as sedate and serene, in reality they trod the path of poor, vagrant refugees.

That sad reality continues today. The Christ who was poor lives on in the poor, who often possess little more than the clothes on their backs, lacking food, shelter, and human dignity. Yet, as St. Vincent said, the poor have the “true faith” as can be seen their unwaveringly, steady trust in God. Their lives and those of the Vincentian Family who accompany them tell the Advent story of hope every day.

I suggest each of us carve out some time from our busy schedules in these Advent weeks to reflect on the scriptures and the life of

St. Vincent, so we may be “watchful, willing, trusting, and testifying” disciples of Jesus, true to our vocation as members of the Vincentian Family. As we take time to encounter the Lord in prayer, scripture, and the Eucharist, we will gain courage, as did St. Vincent, to ask the Lord to direct us to his poor, often unnoticed and on the edge of our lives. In doing so, we will enter into solidarity with them as our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Let me close with a powerful image appropriate for Advent. As I noted earlier, the Church of the Nativity in Magadan offers a community of healing and hope for former Soviet camp prisoners and the poor. This small Church is a feast for the eyes: a stunning, symbolic Martyr’s Chapel, the Stations of the Cross, striking stained-glass windows, and iconography too vivid to forget. Yet, the icon of the Nativity (which is reprinted at the beginning of this letter) above the altar is most striking when one first enters the Church. Its placement there is certainly liturgically appropriate.

But for me, this icon illustrates so much more. It shows us how discipleship with Jesus and the Vincentian charism bear witness to the power and presence of God in our world today. Despite Magadan’s death-dealing past, both the icon and the Church of the Nativity confirm that Christ is born again. The Church of the Nativity and all the works of the world-wide Vincentian Family are daily living reminders to us that *“The light shines on in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”*

May the Lord be born in you anew this Christmas and bless you in this coming year!

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "G. Gregory Gay, C.M.". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the initials "G." and "C.M." clearly visible.

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General