

Union and Collaboration in Saint Vincent: Insights for Today

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During the 2011 International Assembly of the AIC, I heard an idea in a discussion that has helped me very much. I also believe that this idea can help all of us understand the experience of collaboration that was developed by Saint Vincent... an experience that ought to exist among us today. The presenter stated: *When we speak about actions to combat poverty, we identify the needs of the person and we look for a response. In my opinion I believe we have to revise the meaning of the word "need" and we have to begin to tell people, "I need you"... I need you so that together we can build something. This is the best way to help people get back on their feet. A short story best illustrates this point. Father Pierre said that his first companion was a person who wanted to commit suicide. Father Pierre told this man: do whatever you want, but I need you to help me build a house... this man became Father Pierre's first disciple*¹.

"I need you!". I need your collaboration in order for us to accomplish some work together. This was how Vincent experienced his relationship with God and his relationship with other people, especially those persons who were poor. This led Vincent to change his life and as a result Vincent, together with other persons, collaborated with God as he engaged in a mission of charity on behalf of those persons who were poor. In the same way we are invited to have this same experience of needing the poor and needing one another in order to continue the Vincentian mission.

I.

VINCENT'S EXPERIENCE: "I NEED YOU!"

A poor man who did not want to be poor. There was a time when Vincent searched for a lofty position in society. He was concerned about his own financial position and his own needs. During this time

¹ Taken from Elena Lascida's presentation, *Education as a means to eradicate poverty*, given on April 2, 2011 during the International Assembly of the AIC – www.aic-internacional.org

he experienced failures and deceptions. Yet as he opened himself to collaboration with others, his life was transformed and became productive. Let us look at some examples.

1. Vincent and his relationship with the poor: “I need you!”

The poor were the path that led Vincent to an encounter with his true self and with God. As chaplain to Queen Marguerite, he came in contact with people who were hungry and this helped him to understand the reality in which he lived and consequently, Vincent became concerned about the social inequality that existed in France. In Clichy, his experience with the poor helped him discover true religion. In Folleville and Châtillon the poor who were pastorally abandoned and physically hungry made it possible for Vincent to discover the profound call of the gospel and the meaning of his priestly ministry. He was aware of and listened to the internal and external cries of the poor. He allowed the reality of the poor to touch his heart. He learned the painful reality of the peasants, the galley slaves, orphans, the sick poor, the hungry... all of whom were marginalized and Vincent saw this as a great disrespect of the human dignity of the children of God. The reality, especially the reality of those most poor and abandoned, reveals the transformative power of Vincent’s person and the depth of his commitment.

In the school of the poor Vincent no longer understood the Christian faith as an affirmation of abstract truths... now in the midst of concrete situations Vincent discerned God’s call, a call that was very real in the cries of those persons who were suffering, abandoned and excluded. He understood that the poor were victims of a social, political and economic system that inflicted them with hunger, disease and war. Opposed to those who saw the poor as insignificant, as individuals who had to be cast aside so that order could be maintained and the cities could be “cleaned”, Vincent saw the poor as the image of the crucified Christ and saw in them the dignity of the crucified Son of God. The poor became Vincent’s teachers and they showed him that faith involved commitment... commitment to a mission, commitment to charity, commitment to collaboration. The best example of collaboration with the poor is found in the Daughters of Charity, poor peasant women, who were gathered together and formed on behalf of the service of charity.

The cries of the poor that arose from the midst of seventeenth century France, cries that were heard by Vincent and that led him to clothe himself in an active attitude of human and Christian compassion... cries that led Vincent to engage in effective and affective action on behalf of the poor... these cries ultimately inspired Vincent to become

involved in an intense missionary and charitable activity. With the poor, for the poor, and by the poor, Vincent opened himself generously and creatively to the multiple calls that arouse from the reality in which he found himself and no form of human misery made him indifferent.

2. Vincent and collaboration with the laity: “I need you!”

In Châtillon, after being made aware of a family that had been abandoned and that was hungry, Vincent called upon the parishioners to help that family. With the collaboration of the laity, especially women, Vincent began the Confraternities of Charity. After his missionary experience in Folleville and upon his return to the de Gondi estate, Vincent, with the valuable assistance of Madame de Gondi, was able to initiate the work of popular missions and to establish the Congregation of the Mission. In light of the need for more service on behalf of the poor and the limitations of the Ladies of Charity, Vincent welcomed the collaboration of Louise de Marillac and the humble peasant woman, Marguerite Naseau, and this collaboration gave birth the Vincent's most innovative initiative, the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

These three events illustrate the great importance of the laity, especially women, in Vincentian ministry. There is a long list of lay persons who were involved in the life and the ministry of Vincent. This collaboration led him to a deeper understanding of the role and the importance of the laity in the Church's mission. The laity have a divine vocation to participate in Christ's mission and therefore they should not be passive but active ministers in the life and the work of the Church... active in word and deed. Within the framework of lay ministry Vincent established a fundamental relationship with lay persons in order to strengthen his missionary and charitable ministry. We can observe in the cities and the rural areas a notable presence of women in the Vincentian ministry of service to the poor. Women, who had previously been marginalized socially and ecclesiastically, whose domestic values and qualities were recognized and promoted, now played a decisive role in the organization of charitable and evangelizing activities.

3. Vincent and his companions on the mission: “I need you!”

After Vincent preached the first sermon of the mission in Folleville, he had recourse to the Jesuits in Amiens to help him hear confessions. Because of the numerous needs that occurred during the missions

Vincent sought collaborators from among members of the clergy who were known to him. He noticed that he was able to do little and therefore in 1625 Vincent joined together with some other priests in order to preach popular missions... thus began the Congregation of the Mission.

Vincent's awareness of the pastoral needs of the poor was the point of departure for the establishment of the Congregation of the Mission. The Congregation was not the result of some preconceived idea but rather was a response to the missionary needs that Vincent discovered in light of his faith. The Congregation emerged as a collaborative project among priests who dedicated themselves to a specific mission. The cries that arose from the midst of the people led the priests to become strengthened and to collaborate among themselves. Vincent knew how to interpret these cries and was able to organize people in such a manner that they participated in a common missionary project, in an effort of mutual cooperation and as friends who desired to do good.

Vincent's attitude of openness to collaboration with others is again revealed in the configuration of the Congregation of the Mission. After many years of experience, the Congregation was organized and received a definitive juridical, community and missionary structure (in 1658, thirty-three years after its establishment, the members received the Common Rules). The Congregation first passed through a structural process which brought together elements that were learned from their missionary experience, from the collaboration among its members as well as its collaboration with many other individuals. The result of this collaboration, under the inspiration and coordination of Vincent de Paul, made it possible for the members of the Congregation to adopt a lifestyle with practices and structures and a spirituality that was unique to themselves.

Once again the Congregation became an instrument for collaboration in ministry. Vincent described the Company as a group of *poor missionaries who live simply and have only one objective, namely, to serve the poor people of the countryside*. It was thanks to these missionaries, in collaboration with many other persons, that the evangelization of the poor was extended throughout France and to other countries... and it was also thanks to these missionaries, in collaboration with many other persons, that the reform of the clergy became a reality and that various significant initiatives were begun that led to the revitalization of the French Church during the seventeenth century.

4. Vincent and his relationship with Louise de Marillac: “I need you!”

In 1625 Louise's former spiritual director, Jean Pierre de Camus, presented her to Vincent de Paul. In the process of spiritual accompaniment there developed a deep friendship, a relationship of spiritual exchange and service on behalf of the poor.

Louise was a thirty-five year old widow who had endured personal suffering and who was anxious about many things. Beginning in 1629 Vincent involved her in his charitable ministry. He proposed that she visit the Confraternities of Charity and in this way encourage the members of these groups and help to organize their service activity. As a result of these visits Louise experienced God's love that was revealed in Christ, the evangelizer and servant of the poor. Through her love for the poor Louise was freed from her anxiety and doubts. Her horizons were broadened. More important than the thirty-three acts of adoration that she made every day to honor the thirty-three years of Jesus' life, Louise realized that God is love and that people had to approach God through love. With the sure guidance of Vincent, Louise simplified her piety and devotions and became involved in the ministry of charity.

As Louise served the poor with faith she opened herself to discover other realities that were revealed to her by God in the person of those men and women who were poor. In this Louise showed herself to be a strong, virtuous and gifted leader and organizer, a creative and bold woman who developed a meaningful relationship with Vincent, a relationship that was characterized by charitable service as together they confronted many different forms of poverty. Through the grace of God and the guidance of her spiritual director, Louise discovered her true vocation and became the first Daughter of Charity and the co-founder of a new community, a community that was innovative and original and that would play a most significant role in expanding the Vincentian ministry of service to the poor.

In close collaboration and in a spirit of communion with M. Vincent and all the other collaborators, Louise was decisive in the formation and animation of a large Vincentian network of charity. With her feminine sensitivity and human qualities, she believed in the power and the potential of the young peasant women and assisted in bringing them together and forming them for the mission of charity. The collaboration established between Vincent and Louise went beyond a simple functional relationship. It was a true exchange of gifts, a reciprocity that was cultivated by the mystique of charity, a productive friendship of mutual assistance that aided their human and spiritual growth.

5. Vincent and the many ecclesiastical and political collaborators: "I need you!"

Vincent's life involved a large network of relationships and collaborators. Vincent's activity was not the result of personal and willful intellectual analysis. Rather it was the fruit of an attentive reading of the signs of the times, the result of a difficult process of discernment that was done in community, in collaboration and with the help of many people.

- a) *Vincent's personal reality*: Vincent was an impulsive man, inclined to melancholy and he had to work in order to overcome these tendencies... he experienced a crisis in faith and had to learn and search for practices and methods in order to become a good missionary. He grew personally and spiritually; he knew how to ask for help and was not afraid to be dependent on others. In his initial formation he relied on M. De Comet. During the difficult years of crisis and personal searching (1608-1612) he had the support and guidance of Pierre de Bérulle who helped him to overcome his crisis of faith and to advance in human and spiritual maturity. As Vincent developed his spiritual conviction he sought out spiritual masters and established solid friendships with individuals who supported and encouraged his growth in faith and who helped him reformulate his mental concepts and his daily practices. For example, Vincent established the theological foundations for his life and ministry upon the theology of the Council of Trent and the teaching of Saint Ignatius; in Benedict of Canfield Vincent discovered the importance of seeking the will of God and living his life in conformity with God's will; in Bérulle he found the assistance to reorient his priestly life in the direction of pastoral service and to focus his life of faith around the Incarnate Word; in Francis de Sales he accepted the idea of love expressed in works and the importance of the virtues of meekness and goodness; he also received much assistance through the wise and sure counsel of his second spiritual director, M. Duval.
- b) *Vincent's relationships with ecclesiastical authorities*, especially with bishops, were intense and these relationships led him to undertake different ministries: he initiated the ministry of reforming the clergy after a process of discernment with the bishop of Beauvais. Vincent developed his initiatives within the framework of ecclesial collaboration which involved three aspects: first, Vincent always acted in harmony with the guidelines and the thinking of the Church, following faithfully the guidelines of the Council of Trent and the specific directives of the bishops. Second, Vincent, in a spirit of communion and obedience to the

Church, sought the support and the approval of the Pope and the bishops for his initiatives and establishments. Vincent, as a humble and obedient servant, was always willing to listen to the Pope and the bishops and on a personal and community level was willing to accept their decisions. At the same time, he knew how to augment and find support in order to overcome obstacles and thus obtain the approval of the Pope and bishops for his initiatives and establishments (for example, the approval of the Congregation with its specific autonomy with regard to the bishops). Finally, Vincent placed his initiatives and establishments at the service of the Church, willing to respond to the Church's pastoral needs, mindful of the bishop's demands, and seeking to collaborate with other ecclesial associations (the Company of the Most Blessed Sacrament) in charitable works.

- c) Vincent developed broad and complex collaborative relationships *with political and public authorities*. He maintained good relationships with distinguished individuals, wealthy families and prestigious figures in the area of French politics and economics. He was able to rely on the collaboration of public officials and numerous persons from the upper class who helped him consolidate his missionary and charitable activity. For example, during the Thirty Years War and the two Fronde Wars, Vincent organized the collection, storage and distribution of assistance that arrived from every region of France. Appointed by Queen Anne of Austria to the Council of Conscience, a type of Ministry of Worship. Vincent was involved in several tasks dealing with ecclesial matters, for example, the appointment of bishops. Vincent intervened in political matters (unsuccessfully), for example, in 1638 he pleaded with Richelieu for peace in Lorraine which had been devastated by the army; he presented Richelieu with a proposal that would have given the Cardinal 3,000 livres in order to finance a military operation in Ireland that would defend the Catholics who were being oppressed by the invading English troops; on two occasions during the Fronde, once personally and again through a letter, Vincent asked the prime minister, Mazarin, to resign in order to put an end to the people's suffering and establish peace.

A man of his era, Vincent accepted the feudal social structure, the absolute power of the king, and the alliance between political and religious powers... Vincent acted within the existing social-political structure although he expressed a certain unease with the difference between his criteria and the criteria of certain politicians. He felt that religious matters should not be mixed with political matters. It is true that Vincent sought the collaboration of political powers but he himself

was not properly speaking a political man nor did he act from political motives or personal self-interest. His primary concern was the public good and the welfare of the poor and this explains his direct and indirect interventions in politics.

II.

ENLIGHTENMENT FOR OUR COLLABORATION TODAY AS A VINCENTIAN FAMILY

“We need one another!”

The work that was undertaken by Vincent was not strictly speaking a personal work. It was a community and participative work, a work that was done by a team, by a network of collaborators (as we would say today). Vincent brought together rich and poor, members of the clergy and laity, men and women. He mobilized and formed people of good will; he was able to rely on the important collaboration of other persons in order to establish his institutions (the Confraternities of Charity, the Congregation of the Mission, the Company of the Daughters of Charity); and he involved public officials and saw that collaboration was the key for success in serving the poor.

Today Vincent’s experience serves as an invitation that is extended to the members of the various groups of the Vincentian Family... an invitation to collaborate. In Vincent’s experience we are able to find some insights and guidelines for our collaboration today.

1. Collaboration begins with the cries of the poor and must involve the poor in the process of collaboration

All the participative and community action that Vincent directed was structured and developed around the poor. As Vincent read, with the eyes of faith, the reality that surrounded him, he developed a true collaboration that was undertaken as an option of solidarity on behalf of the poor. Vincent lived with the poor, shared their conditions, entered into their sentiments and learned from them. He acted with the poor beside him and embraced their cause, defended their interests, awakened in them a sense of collaboration and served them with love, humility, simplicity, self-sacrifice, meekness and sensitivity. He oriented all his activities, efforts, attitudes and material and human resources toward an effective service of the poor.

Today our collaboration should be based on the cries of the poor and should be developed as an effective service that transforms the reality of poverty. This means that we are willing to search together

and organize ourselves so that we can respond to the cries of poor with a methodology of reciprocity that invites the participation of those persons who are poor and develops their potentials. In this way our methodology becomes a part of the life and the culture of the poor and creates a dialogue between the culture and the faith of the poor and the culture and the faith of those who serve the poor. True collaboration on behalf of the poor cannot be a place of experimentation and improvisation for the business matters or financial interests of some group or some persons.

2. Collaboration on behalf of the poor begins with the gospel mystique of faith, hope and justice

Vincent loved and served the poor within the framework of the mystique of evangelical charity: *Charity is above all Rules, and everything comes down to that. If it is a woman of rank, you have to do what she tells you* (CCD X, 478). *There is no act of charity that is not accompanied by justice* (CCD II, 68). *Charity is inventive unto infinity*. In the gospels Jesus developed an immediate relationship with the poor: what is done to the poor is done to Christ. The poor are a living expression of the Lord's presence among us and not simply intermediaries. In this sense the poor are the sacrament of Jesus: a revelation and a communication of his mystery. The cries of the poor, interpreted in the light of faith, led Vincent to discover and follow Jesus Christ, evangelizer and servant of the poor. The covenant of love became the most significant aspect of Vincent's life and he saw an intimate relationship between love of Christ and love of neighbor: *in serving persons who are poor we serve Jesus Christ* (CCD IX, 199).

This evangelical mystique that Vincent experienced grounds and motivates every form of Vincentian collaboration. *Charity is an elevated form of love that is beyond the senses and reason*. Charity is a gift of the Spirit and the measuring rod of our action; it is the principle of discernment and the guide for our action and our life of faith; it is the transforming power of life and society that sheds new light upon social and personal relationships and requires new attitudes: respect for human dignity, justice, friendship, solidarity. Charity arises from faith, is intimately related to justice and gives authentic, liberating and divine meaning to life and Vincentian ministry. Charity allows people to experience the depth and the fullness of true social love.

In those individuals committed to pastoral ministry charity presents the possibility of creating new values, experiences, attitudes and practices that go beyond "the doing of things", beyond the search for objective and material results that have been established by some individual who works in the social environment. As a result of the establishment

of new human relationships based on gratitude and communion and the development of an authentic sense of life, charity presents the possibility of building a new life and becoming involved in committed action on behalf of a society whose members are bound more closely together and live in solidarity with one another. Without charity, collaboration on behalf of the poor can, with the aid of sophisticated and advanced means and modern resources, be successful and produce results, but it will be void of warmth and affect, void of a vision of hope and will be unable to promote the true integral human development of those persons who are most poor and vulnerable.

3. Collaboration with a profound ecclesial sense

The collaboration that was developed by Vincent was not an isolated activity but was part of the church's life and ministry. The ecclesial community is the mystical body of Christ, the evangelizing and missionary community that is commanded to act with mercy toward the poor. With this understanding Vincent stressed the importance of unity and communion within the community and the whole church. Recognizing the diversity of functions as individuals engaged in merciful service on behalf of the poor, the suffering members of the Church, Vincent also stressed the importance of collaboration and the co-responsibility of everyone in order to achieve the greater well-being of the body.

Vincentian collaboration has to be a lively expression of mission and charity on behalf of the poor and this collaboration has to be expressed within the Church, with the Church and for the good of the Church. Our Vincentian identity is rooted in and built upon our missionary and charitable commitment to the poor. This commitment defines our specific place within the church and gives a specific form to our collaboration with the church. Vincentian collaboration (in union with the Pope and bishops, in communion with other ecclesial groups and inserted into the pastoral reality of the local church) ought to strengthen our prophetic and missionary witness on behalf of those who are poor. We must distance ourselves from isolated and parallel action and we must resist the temptation to put aside our spirituality and to desire to be involved in successful, prestigious social and ecclesial activity to the detriment of becoming involved in committed and liberating activities with the poor.

4. Collaboration that empowers the poor and those who collaborate with the poor

Vincent was a master of empowerment². He developed processes that helped people take control of their life and that helped the poor and women and parents discover their dignity and their strength which in turn enabled them to seek a better life, a life that was more dignified and just. Cooperation in ministry with the poor consists of helping them discover the power to develop themselves and free themselves from every form of slavery, vulnerability and poverty. In reality, the poor have a power and a faith that enables them to evangelize and initiate a process of renewal and liberation. Missionary and charitable collaboration ought to be action that arise from faith and helps people to discover and live with a new interior awareness. Thus our missionary and charitable collaboration should also help people transform themselves and the reality in which they live. It is necessary to recognize the richness and giftedness that each person and association offers. To minister in order to initiate a process of empowerment is an important and urgent task because it provides individuals with strength and power for personal and social growth as well as enabling people to engage in a process of liberation. In this process of Vincentian empowerment it becomes important to accept and mobilize the poor so that they themselves engage in service. It is equally important to value and promote the missionary potential of the laity, especially women. Finally, we must make every effort to form collaborators and provide them with technical, human and spiritual skills so that they can become true servants.

5. Collaboration that is creative, real and diverse and that leads to a process of good decision making within the church and society

Using the means and concepts of his era, Vincent engaged in service of the poor that was understood as a defense and a promotion of the dignity of the children of God. Vincent acted in a charitable manner as he interacted with distinct levels of society where he combated poverty with the participation of different individuals and organization.

Vincent's experience of strengthening the social sectors of society to act on behalf of the poor is an element of Vincentian collaboration that

² I use here the word "empowerment" which consists of a process in which we recognize that there exists in others a power to develop themselves so that they become the author of personal and social change.

should be explored. Charity, which is intimately bound up with justice, indicates that activities that involve providing social assistance or social promotion ought to begin with a respect for the legitimate rights of the person and therefore the poor are not the object of some favor or charitable act but are the subject of rights. This service of charity asks a social-political question that demands a response and also demands our defense of people's legitimate human rights. Our service of charity also demands our condemnation of those actions that directly or indirectly deprive people of these rights, for example, the accumulation of wealth by a minority of individuals that ultimately creates poverty for the majority of people.

Vincentian action ought to seek greater strength through the collaboration of distinct social actors (the poor, politicians, social organization, popular movements, etc.). In this way everyone, in accord with their possibilities and qualities, joins together in a common project on behalf of a more just and human society, on behalf of a society whose members live together with strong bonds of solidarity. Certainly, as we see from Vincent's experience, collaboration demands much learning and discernment... it demands that we confront and overcome many possible conflicts. The Vincentian contribution to this effort of collaboration must be guided by the gospel criteria of social justice and the social doctrine of the Church. We must always act with a critical sense and we must interact within the reality of the different vibrant social forces that are present in our society. We must also always act on behalf of the interests of those who poor. As we act we must not allow ourselves to be manipulated nor should we become involved in a search for or the defense of unjust, partisan interests that are opposed to the cause of justice and solidarity.

6. Collaboration in the humble reciprocity and exchange of gifts

Looking at Vincent, not as an isolated figure, but as one who was surrounded by numerous collaborators, we discover a person who was able to bring other people together, who needed others and who opened himself to mutual help. It was no accident that Vincent emphasized humility as the fundamental virtue to guide his life and activity. Humility, the virtue of Jesus Christ, implies that we affirm the reality that every good gift comes from God. This includes the recognition of our limitations which should lead us to total confidence in God.

Humility supposes a constant emptying of self that enables one to put aside every form of arrogance, self-sufficiency and self-centeredness. Humility makes us dependent on God and interdependent with our brothers and sisters. No one is sufficient unto themselves; no branch of the Vincentian Family can consider itself as self-sufficient

and in no need of assistance from some other branch of the family. Collaboration leads us to view the poor and other collaborators as persons who have qualities and abilities that can be developed and that can help us grow in charity. A new attitude of reciprocity, interdependence and openness to collaboration with others requires relationships that are free from every form of discrimination and the desire for power. In the humble exchange of gifts, we create the possibility for growth in charity and the establishment of a true alliance on behalf of the Vincentian mission.

Vincent said: *We are to run to the spiritual needs of our neighbor as if we were running to a fire* (XI, 25). With words and attitudes and effective action, Vincent clothed himself in the reality of the poor and to the degree that he was able to, he engaged in activity to relieve their suffering. He did all of this by trying to unite and organize people of good will and as a result his activity was organized, united, and carried out in collaboration with other individuals and organizations. Following in the footsteps of Vincent may the members of the Vincentian Family come together, organize themselves, and move forward together in order to collaborate in the great ministry of serving the poor.

A question for reflection

In light of Vincent's example, how can we collaborate among ourselves as members of the Vincentian Family so that together we build up this great Vincentian work of mission and charity on behalf of the poor?

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