

2013: Our Lenten Journey, From Calvary to Caritas



OUR LADY'S VOYAGE

*Lady, whose child you carried to Bethlehem,
Not on a thruway, but on a road of rocks, pebbles, and stone.
Carry me under your heart always, loving, gentle, and smooth
Until your Son lifts me up into his crucified arms.*

Brother AUGUSTINE TOWEY, C.M. † 2012

To all members of the Vincentian Family

Dear Sisters and Brothers:

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

This year, our Lenten journey begins early. Yet, it is never too soon for Vincentian Family to contemplate the gifts of faith in Jesus Christ along with the heritage of hope, our charism. This year, Lent occurs in the "Year of Faith", which our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI in

his Apostolic Letter *Porta Fidei* likens to a “door of faith, always open, ushering us into a life of communion with God and entry into his Church” (PF, 2012, 1).

This special year coincides with the fiftieth anniversary of the start of the Second Vatican Council. Along with Lent, it offers us an opportunity to reflect both on our discipleship with Jesus Christ, and how we live our Vincentian charism. Lent is not meant to be an ‘annual exercise’, but an opportunity to open ourselves to growth in grace. Pope Benedict reminds us that ‘to enter through that door is to set out on a journey that last a lifetime’ (PF, 1).

This year’s Lenten Message by the Holy Father holds a truly Vincentian theme. He tells us that Lent and the year of faith “offer a valuable opportunity to meditate on the relationship between faith and charity” (LM, 2013, 1). In both *Porta Fedei* and the Lenten Message, one sees several references to a scriptural quote we know well: “*Caritas Christi urget Nos*” – “The love of Christ urges us” (2 Cor. 5:14). It is the core of what it means to be a Christian. Along with the Daughters of Charity, I am pleased by the Holy Father’s use of their motto!

Yet, all members of the Vincentian Family know that it is more than scripture, a motto, or a community seal. It is a way of life for all followers of Jesus and Saints Vincent and Louise. It takes its origin from Jesus Christ, who told his disciples, “As often as you did it for one of these least of my brethren, you did it for me” (Mt. 25:40). In this letter, I will reflect on three timely themes for our Lenten journey: ***to recognize, to reconfigure, and to renew.***

A Time to Recognize

“You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free”
(Jn. 8:32)

Lent is a time for an encounter with the truth, as we affirm a basic reality often eluding Christians: we are all redeemed sinners. In today’s fast-paced world, we can easily avoid any depth of self-examination. Life’s multiple demands often come with a ferocity that leaves us breathless and seeking a respite that can lead to detachment. We have heard Socrates’ dictum that “the unexamined life is not worth living”. But neither is the “unredeemed” life!

The ‘redeemed life’ comes from using the disciplines of Lent: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving to probe our hearts, minds and actions. Then, we can courageously ask ourselves a crucial question: what am I doing daily to grow in my love for Christ and in service to my brothers and sisters, especially “the least of these”? But first, we must be willing to amend our busy routine to encounter the Lord Jesus in the depth of

our being as our moment of truth. As an old saying goes, "The truth will set you free, but first it may make you miserable!"

Those parts of oneself that need healing and redemption are ultimately the work of God. In a world that often encourages us to hide behind the false facades of power, position, or appearance, Lent reminds us that it is not our efforts alone that bring integration or inner peace. This was a hard reality Vincent de Paul learned early on: despite the 'onward and upward' life he sought and achieved, he was left with an inner emptiness and a desire for something more. St. Paul captures this moment of inner recognition well in his letter to the Ephesians:

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your doing; it is the gift of God, not because of works... For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works God has prepared... that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:8-10).

Let us make this Lent a time to recognize that we are God's workmanship, gifted and graced.

A Time to Reconfigure

"What must we do to be doing the works of God?"
(Jn. 6:28)

The word 'reconfigure' may seem unusual or unfamiliar. Once used as a scientific or technical term, it means to "change the shape or formation, to remodel, or restructure". It is familiar to my Vincentian confreres and to the Daughters of Charity, as changes in membership and the apostolate have made it necessary for countries and provinces to reconfigure.

But Lent is not mainly concerned with the external questions of "the works of God" posed by the disciples to Jesus or, for that matter, the demands of today's world. Reconfiguration is also a way of seeking "metanoia", or conversion of heart, leading to a fundamental openness to God. Pope Benedict tells us the purpose of this "Year of Faith" is a "summons to an authentic and renewed conversion to the Lord, the one Saviour of the world" (PF, 6)

When we recognize that which we treasure the most be it our families, relationships, work, health, or life in general is changing in unexpected or unwanted ways, we encounter the reality of reconfiguration. Like Lent, it calls us to make the inner journey to seek Jesus. Holding on to what we cannot control, clinging to what we cannot change, or wishing the past was the present will lead us away from doing the will of God and the work of God.

Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac both faced the reality of reconfiguration in their lives. Louise, a married woman of means, was widowed and thrown into an unfamiliar world. After founding religious and lay communities, Vincent struggled with constant demands for his attention. At times, both found the task of leadership overwhelming. Yet, each had an inner life nourished by prayer, the Word, and Eucharist, which gave them fortitude to adapt and grow. Vincent and Louise sought and found Jesus daily. This Lent, let us allow Christ to reconfigure our hearts, so we may accept the inevitable changes in the landscape of our lives.

A Time to Renew

*“This is the work of God:
that you believe in him who God has sent”
(Jn. 6:29)*

Lent and the “Year of Faith” call for a renewal and deepening of our faith and charism. In a world wracked with much suffering, where the road to Calvary is strewn with innumerable crosses, we are reminded that in the Paschal Mystery, God is still at work in our world. We meet our God in the person of Jesus, who by his Incarnation, entered and redeemed humanity. Renewal comes in transformation by Jesus Christ in prayer, God’s Word and Eucharist, to better live our Vincentian charism. We journey to and from Calvary with the gift of Caritas.

Pope Benedict reflects on this reality, noting “The Christian life consists in continuously scaling the mountain to meet God, and then coming back down, bearing the love and strength drawn from him, so as to serve our brothers and sisters with God’s own love” (LM, 3). In both *Porta Fidei* and the Lenten message, the Holy Father takes great pains to stress the intrinsic link between faith and service to the poor. He writes, “Faith without charity bears no fruit... Many Christians dedicate their lives with love to those who are lonely, marginalized, or excluded... because it is in them that the reflection of Christ’s own face is seen” (PF, 14).

As members of the Vincentian Family, we embrace this truth in our charism of charity. But like any virtuous action, it can become rote, reduced to a function, instead of driving us forward. As followers of Jesus and Vincent, two virtues essential to this are simplicity and humility; they are foundational for a relationship with God and in serving the poor. Vincent said, “Our Lord is found in and is pleased only in humility of heart and simplicity in words and actions” (Vol. XII, L. 204, 2 May 1659). Reflect on how we can advance in these virtues.

I mentioned reconfiguration as a Congregational strategy. In the 2010 General Assembly, two strategies surfaced on this theme I believe are applicable to the Vincentian Family. The first: to cultivate a vital sense of belonging beyond local communities. The second: to foster personal availability and mobility to participate in new missionary projects. This Lent, let us reflect on how we can strengthen our sense of belonging and availability to live our charism.

Mary's Journey and Ours

This Lenten letter opened with a Marian theme amidst a desolate scene with a simple poem. In November 2012, Hurricane Sandy wrought havoc from the Caribbean to the East coast of the USA, causing terrible destruction. In Breezy Point, a small beach enclave in New York City, the hurricane's force blew up fuel tanks and downed power lines, creating a fire that burned over 100 homes in minutes. Miraculously, no one died. The only fixture left untouched in the area was a small shrine to Our Blessed Lady. Today, it is a place of prayer for residents of all faiths. It has been named Madonna of Breezy Point, showing us the powerful, protective role of Mary.

The poem accompanying the picture was written by a confrere from the New York area who died recently. This poem was literally one of his last ones. It is a fitting reminder not only of his life, but the life that Mary, Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal gave us as Mother of the Lord. Mary is our Mother too, and she is always close to us. May the Lord bless you in this Lenten season, so that your journey may lead to true renewal in faith, charity, and our charism. May we may always serve in the name of Jesus Christ and the way of St. Vincent de Paul.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

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Superior General