

Opening Address to Visitors

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Superior General

“Celebrating our charism: Lord, it is good that we are here!”

My dear brothers in St. Vincent,

“Lord, it is good that we are here”.

This is a familiar quote from Scripture, one that captures perfectly how I feel in being here with you today. The full quote is: *“Peter said to Jesus ‘Lord it is good that we are here!’”* (Mt. 17:4). I echo Peter’s poignant sentiment: ***it is good that we are here!*** We have come from all over the Congregation throughout the world to pray, reflect, study, and learn from one another. **It is good that we are here** to explore more fully our Vincentian vocation and charism. **It is good that we are here** at this mid- point between our 2010 General Assembly and our next one to discern together what we have accomplished and what still needs to be done to fulfill the Lines of Action we agreed upon for the good of the Congregation in 2010.

As you know, this scriptural quote is from the story of the Transfiguration, a feast we celebrate next month. This story fascinates me on several levels; perhaps it intrigues you as well. Whenever I hear it, I find myself wondering about several aspects of the story. For example: why did Jesus take only three of the Twelve with him up the mountain? Why was Peter so quick to want to build tents (or booths) there? What moved the disciples to go from awful fear to awe-filled faith in so short a time? And why, after such a powerful experience, did Jesus tell the three not to say anything about this experience until after he was raised from the dead?

Please relax: I am not here to engage in a full- throttle scriptural study and exegesis! But I would like to use this beautiful story as a backdrop to reflect on how we can deepen our love and practice of the Vincentian charism today. The “Transfiguration” is a story that presents us with ideas and analogies for our faith journey both as individuals and as a community. It is a lesson on how to open ourselves to Jesus’ transforming presence so we can live our charism more fully.

It is my hope that our time together in these days will be a ‘transfiguration’ of sorts, that our meeting will be a transforming event, deepening our love of Jesus and St. Vincent. As you know, at the 41st General Assembly, we agreed on a way forward we called “*Creative Fidelity for the Mission*”. We identified and committed to strengthening our three essential benchmarks:

- To “recognize our responsibility for a great heritage, from St. Vincent and the first missionaries up to our day”;
- To be “docile to the Holy Spirit, who wishes to make more dynamic our fidelity in creativity to the Mission”;
- To “commit ourselves to recreate the charism, attentive to the signs of the times”.

Simply put, I believe these benchmarks encompass our past heritage, present realities, and future hope. Thus, in our time together, I encourage you to reflect and engage this question:

- ***How do I help the confreres in my province exhibit ‘creative fidelity for the Mission’ in the personal, communal, and apostolic dimensions of their lives as Vincentians?***

As you know, the ‘Lines of Action’ are the actual means by which we put into practice these ideals. So it is essential that we review and reflect on them in our time together. The areas we will focus are all in the Lines of Action. They include: formation, reconfiguration, dialogue with the poor, dialogue with the Vincentian Family, creativity in our ministry, and the methodology of systemic change. For each area, the Assembly listed desired broad-based goals, which could be adapted according to the various sizes and needs of provinces.

In 2011, the General Council approved a strategic communications plan by our Office of Communications that organized the Lines of Action into yearly themes. By doing so, we hope to assist provinces and visitors’ conferences in developing strategies to raise awareness and to better assure their implementation on local, provincial, and inter-provincial levels. Each of the five years of the strategic plan focuses on a main theme approved by the General Assembly. In taking this approach I, myself, and the assistants general use every opportunity we can- be they talks, homilies, and canonical visits to raise awareness of this yearly theme among the confreres.

Consistent with our Vincentian heritage, we decided that besides the yearly themes, there would be one over-arching theme running for the length of the plan: “Dialogue with the Poor”. It serves as a constant reminder to focus on our mission and charism. We believe that this theme and the yearly ones from the “Lines of Action” are a viable way

to keep the work of the General Assembly before Visitors, Conferences of Visitors, local communities, confreres, as well as members of the wider Vincentian Family.

In addition to the annual theme of "Dialogue with the Poor" 'Systemic Change' was the theme in 2012. This year it is 'Reconfiguration: Pathway to Creativity in our Ministries'. In 2014, the theme will be 'Initial and Ongoing Formation', and in 2015, 'Vincentian Family Dialogue'. As 2016, we will use the time before the General Assembly to evaluate the "Lines of Action", both in their implementation and effectiveness.

But neither the words of a General Assembly or a thematic communications plan are transformative in itself. That is why we gather here for these days. Perhaps a return to the Transfiguration story is helpful. Like the three disciples chosen by Jesus to go up the mountain, you, as representative leaders in the Congregation, are but a small sample group embodying the hopes and aspirations of our 3,000 confreres. So, I hope our time together will be a true experience of community, one in service of our mission as we follow Jesus Christ, Evangelizer of the poor. And from this encounter, it is my deep desire that it will lead to a re-kindling of the Vincentian charism in our confreres, communities, and apostolates.

"Lord, it is good that we are here". We did not come here to escape or detach ourselves from the realities of community life and ministry in our provinces or in the wider Congregation. We are not here to build booths of self-congratulation, but to pitch tents of mutual sharing and fellowship. Like the disciples, we may feel overwhelmed at the challenges before us in our provinces. But like the disciples, we know the Lord Jesus always accompanies us, and that the charism of St. Vincent will inspire and guide us as his spiritual sons. May these days strengthen our bond as brothers; may they be a time for rich exchange of ideas and experiences; and may they bring about a renewal of hope so we may more fully "become what we are called to be".

As you can see from our ambitious schedule, we have much to do! Our daily schedule, while full, allows time for prayer, Eucharist, learning, dialogue, and reflection. I urge you to make the most of this time for your own growth and for the good of your province. Last summer, I had the good fortune of spending time with our confreres who serve as Directors of the Daughters of Charity. As you know, this is a service of the Congregation provided to the Daughters that you so generously assist, often at the expense of your own personnel needs. When I spoke at the opening session, I made a request of the confreres that I will make to you today.

I proposed that their time together be governed by what I call the "three R's": **Reflect, react, and re-integrate**. I offer that same frame-

work as we begin this important meeting today. Take time to reflect on what you read and hear, carefully listening and processing not only words but ideas. React to what you hear and think; speak your mind formally and informally, whether it be in your small groups or our plenary sessions. And finally, re-integrate: discover how, what you see and learn here, can benefit your confreres and assist you in your work as their Visitor.

“Lord it is good for us to be here”. Now, let’s get to work!