

The Vincentian Family: Development and Perspectives

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During the past fifteen years that has been a joint effort to articulate the life of the Vincentian Family. In order to have a more complete vision of this work and in order to evaluate and plan our activity in this regard we attempted to pool those persons who are working directly with the Vincentian Family. We received very few responses and as a result we are not able to provide a broad and precise overview of the current situation and present development of the Vincentian Family. Nevertheless, the few responses that we did receive contain enriching and enlightening information. Thus, in light of this data and our own experience in this ministry, we present some data and reflections on the development of the Vincentian Family.

In over eighty countries across five continents there are **initiatives of rapprochement and cooperation** among the branches and members of the Vincentian Family. The intensity and level of the development of this activity vary greatly from one country to another and even from one region to another in the same country. This depends on the social-pastoral situation of each place and the presence and the number of branches. This collaboration includes the participation of more than sixty local groups and a countless number of people.

There is a growing **awareness of belonging to the same family** with a common spiritual heritage of service to the poor: one lived out in a broad variety of organizational and service structures that result in various spiritual experiences. The diversity and uniqueness of each branch is understood from the perspective of values that ought to be respected and promoted and that therefore help one to understand the richness and the breath of the Vincentian charism.

The organization of the activity of the Vincentian Family is developed with a more pastoral dynamic without major structures and legal weight:

- a) on the *International Level* we have: the International Committee of the Vincentian Family; the Formation Meeting of the International Leaders; the Vincentian Family Office in Rome; the Zafen project/collaboration effort of the Vincentian Family in Haiti; the

Systemic Change Team; Collaboration Commission of the Vincentian Family; Commission on Islam;

- b) on the *National Level*: the majority of the countries have a national coordination team and there are many diversified initiatives on this level;
- c) on the *Regional and Local Level*: there are many diversified organizational initiatives: regional or local coordination teams, specific service teams, common calendar of activities, centers for formation and animation, etc. In some regions or countries the organization revolves around the participative collaboration of the various branches while in other countries and/or regions the activity and the organization of the Vincentian Family is still dependent on the initiative and the leadership of the Congregation of the Mission and/or the Daughters of Charity.

The awareness that we are a family that is constantly growing and is very diversified in accord with the different local realities has led to the development of a series of specific initiatives and activities in order to share and deepen the Vincentian charism, in order to better understand the reality of the poor and in order to promote mutual help in service of the poor. Among the activities that have been developed we highlight the following:

- meetings and gatherings for Vincentian formation,
- joint celebration of the feast of Saint Vincent and other Vincentian feasts,
- meetings for mutual understanding and deepening our life together,
- actions and proposals for collaboration and mutual help among the branches,
- joint action on behalf of evangelization and service of the poor,
- development of advisory services especially for the lay branches,
- publication of materials and providing subsidies for studying and spreading the Vincentian charism... All of these activities vary in scope and intensity and also vary according to the different situations and locations.

The activities have produced many significant fruits of Vincentian collaboration. These include, deepening and living out the Vincentian charism and our Vincentian spirituality; growth in the spirit of collaboration and mutual learning in service of the poor; increased knowledge with regard to the reality of the poor, the new forms of poverty and collaborating together in joint projects of service on behalf of the

poor, thus providing better quality services with a broader outreach; support for the lay branches, as seen in the growth of these branches and the development of the importance of the laity in the Vincentian mission; greater collaboration in the area of formation, especially with regard to providing advisory services for the lay branches; and forming alliances with church groups, government and social agencies in order to carry out projects of service on behalf of the poor.

There are various **difficulties and challenges** that must be confronted in order to develop stronger and more fruitful action and union among the branches of the Vincentian Family:

- a) there is still a need for greater participation and commitment among the branches and the members of the family; many branches and individuals remain caught up with their personal and/or group interests and there is still much ignorance and indifference; the proposals with regard to collaboration have not reached the base and in many situations and places it is restricted to a small group of people;
- b) formation continues to be an important challenge in order to deepen our understanding of the Vincentian mission. As a result, there is a need to search together for the criteria that should guide cooperation and service on behalf of the poor;
- c) the implementation of joint projects of service on behalf of the poor is still very limited. There is a need for leadership and better preparation in order to work together... interest and perseverance in common activities, especially those activities that respond to the new forms of poverty and that utilize the methodology of systemic change are very limited and need to be encouraged and supported;
- d) the lack of sufficient human and financial resources in order to promote collaboration among the branches is felt on a deep level;
- e) there are difficulties as consecrated persons (priests, brothers, sisters) and laity work together; there can be difficulties in recognizing and promoting the value of the laity;
- f) there is need to grow in our spirit of collaboration and mutual respect. Many times the smaller branches are not properly valued. There are conflicts in personal relationship and areas of competence and there are power struggles;
- g) there are difficulties in the relationships between the Vincentian Family and other church institutions (dioceses, parish, pastoral groups) especially in places where the Vincentian Family is very small and mostly lay;

h) in the promotion and the realization of concrete collaboration, there are many practical and operational difficulties: distance, lack of time and persons to engage in this ministry, unorganized and lack of commitment, lack of effective means of communication, lack of supervision, the frequent change of priests and Sisters working with the Vincentian Family, the misalignment of programs and interests among the branches and the joint action of the Vincentian Family, the limited participation of younger people.

I believe that the experience of cooperation among the branches of the Vincentian Family has created new pastoral horizons in which the experiences and the fruits of this joint ministry always present **new demands and challenges**.

The activity of the Vincentian Family is a true historical process of revitalization of the Vincentian vocation. It is a fruitful reality and a promising approach. It needs to be encouraged, assumed, deepened, and concretized by all; it is an horizon to be desired and sought after in order to revitalize the Vincentian mission. It is necessary to engrave this proposal on the heart and in the life of the members and the branches of the Vincentian Family (existential and spiritual assimilation) and express it in our daily life through effective and significant action and commitment. As a result of this conviction, there is a strong imperative, especially on the part of the leaders of the various branches to promote in an effective manner this proposal and to make available the necessary human and financial resources for its implementation and development.

From the perspective of the common ideal and an awareness of mutual cooperation, **it is necessary to broaden and deepen the participation and the organization of the Vincentian Family.** Experience has shown that when the awareness of being a family is promoted and when coordination teams are organized on distinct levels and mechanisms are created for joint action, then the activity of the Vincentian Family grows and achieves greater depth, relevancy and effectiveness in deepening and living the Vincentian mission. This presupposes participation and organization, respect and acceptance of each branch so that the spiritual and institutional boundaries are surpassed and enriched. The rich perspective of living a common ideal and the possibility of broader and more enriching activity on behalf of the poor are the incentives to address the difficulties and deepen collaboration, organization and joint action.

Today, in accord with the reality and the specific call of the poor, **the Vincentian Family is called to deepen its understanding and its expression of the Vincentian charism and mission.** The branches and the members of the Vincentian Family have as their challenge the

need to reinterpret the Vincentian charism, looking for ways to explain its relevance and significance at this precise historical moment. We live at a time when there is a change of era, a time that demands profound, solid and on-going formation. The Vincentian Family is a new and privileged place and a new school that enables the members to deepen and revitalize the Vincentian charism through a process of mutual learning. Each branch has its proper contribution which enables it to obtain a broader, more current and consistent understanding of the Vincentian charism. This in turn allows for the revitalization of the Vincentian vocation, indicating in a clear and prophetic manner its nature and its apostolic destination on behalf of the poor, as pointing out the nature of the Vincentian vocation in the church and in society.

It is important to share and promote the Vincentian charism with the laity who today are emerging more and more as the true subjects in living out and promoting and revitalizing the congregational charisms which before were restricted to religious congregations. In the Vincentian Family, the laity have a significant presence which demonstrates the relevance of the Vincentian charism and its power to bring people together. In this effort the laity have a role of being active participants in the development of a proper expression of living out the Vincentian charism and our Vincentian spirituality. In other words, the laity are not merely “consumers” in this regard. As we share the Vincentian charism with the laity, young people and women merit special attention, since they can provide great help in rejuvenating the Vincentian practices and organizational structures. Sharing and developing the Vincentian charism with the laity gives strength to the members of the Vincentian Family so that they can be a leaven of charity within the Church and society and at the same time give witness to God’s preferential love for the poor.

The proposal with regard to the activity of the Vincentian Family, lived out within the context of an ecclesiology of communion and in a relationship of reciprocity that brings together diverse forces... this requires **the promotion and the intensification of proposal and projects for common action that utilizes the methodology of systemic change**. In light of Saint Vincent’s practice with regard to serving the poor in their “material and spiritual” needs and with regard to “affective” and “effective” love, the members of the Vincentian Family are challenged to assume the methodology of systemic change as a important force for growth and for the revitalization and the development of the Vincentian charism. This methodology consists in understanding service on behalf of the poor in an integral manner, articulating the service of charity and the word and seeking to transform the reality and the causes that generate poverty. To learn this method well and apply it to concrete projects of service on behalf of the poor is a challenge for the Vincentian Family and is also a possibil-

ity for creative and transformational service that goes beyond assistance and other conventional methods.

Collaboration with the Vincentian Family and as members of the Vincentian Family is for the Congregation of the Mission a rich and satisfying horizon of reconfiguration. Being a practical aspect of creative fidelity, reconfiguration seeks to translate the fundamental charism into new attitudes and practices and structures that are suited to the present reality. Collaboration with the Vincentian Family and collaboration as members of the Vincentian Family allows us to develop a process of on-going interaction between the Vincentian/gospel ideal and the present historical challenges. This collaboration moves forward from the perspective of creating a new manner of being, a new historical manner in living out the Vincentian mission.

Activity with the Vincentian Family allows the Congregation of the Mission to move out beyond its own works and therefore, with an attitude of humility, it can join together with the other members of the Vincentian Family in the pursuit of and the deepening of a significant, updated doctrinal foundation in order to understand, justify and encourage itself on the level of being and on the level of acting in a Vincentian manner. We can learn much from other Vincentian Congregations and from the laity. This new knowledge expands, individually and collectively, our sense of belonging and broadens the horizons of the mission... it also creates new sentiments and experiences and commitments that give us new strength to take up the Vincentian cause of service on behalf of the poor.

Activity with the Vincentian Family allows the Congregation of the Mission to better define its place and its role within the Church, for example, to take up anew and with even greater strength the traditional practice of popular missions; to develop its ministry in formation, especially with the laity; to intensify its service with the poor, etc. In collaboration with the Vincentian Family, the Congregation of the Mission can better situate itself in the social and ecclesial arena as an effective agent involved in missionary service on behalf of the poor.

The areas open to activity for the Vincentian Family place the Congregation of the Mission in new pastoral situations, open new horizons for ministry, require a new relationship with other men and women religious and with the laity (resulting in team ministry and networking). The newness of this collaboration moves us beyond conventional practices, provincial and congregational boundaries and requires new practices, methods, and structures for this activity. Revision of our works, new needs in formation and human and financial resources are needed to create new goals and objectives for collaboration with the Vincentian Family.