

# Systemic Change: A Way to a Fuller Vincentian and Ecclesial Identity

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Why is a Systemic Change mentality so important for us as members (and leaders) of the Congregation of the Mission? Might you, as Visitors, help promote a Systemic Change mentality among the members of your province and within the wider Vincentian Family? We suggest to you two reasons why a Systemic Change mentality is so important for all of us as members and for you as leaders of the Congregation of the Mission: 1) the New Evangelization to which the Church is calling us today; 2) some seeds of Systemic Change in the life and writings of St. Vincent.

## I.

### THE CHURCH'S CALL TO A NEW EVANGELIZATION

Last October bishops from all over the world gathered with Pope Benedict XVI for a Synod on the New Evangelization. They were not discussing a new theme.

The Medellin document, which had dramatic effects in Latin America, called for a re-evangelization of human existence<sup>1</sup>. It envisioned a Latin American Church as an Evangelizer of the Poor, committed to living in solidarity with them<sup>2</sup>. The final document at Puebla continued this emphasis of a renewed evangelization<sup>3</sup>. The Santo Domingo document, building on the experience of two decades, provided an extensive development of the contents of "new evangelization"<sup>4</sup>. By the time of Aparecida (2007), the term "New Evangelization" was taken for granted<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> MEDELLÍN, VIII, 8.

<sup>2</sup> MEDELLÍN, XIV, 8.

<sup>3</sup> PUEBLA, 340 f.

<sup>4</sup> SANTO DOMINGO, *Conclusions* 23 ff.

<sup>5</sup> Aparecida, Message to the Peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean, 3.

Almost all commentators agree that Paul VI, while not using the term “new evangelization” is one of its principal architects. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* provides some of the richest source materials for the new evangelization<sup>6</sup>:

*Evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed, if it does not use their language, their signs and symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask, and if it does not have an impact on their concrete life.*

*Evangelii Nuntiandi* had a great influence on our Vincentian Constitutions of 1984. In fact, it is one of the few documents our Constitutions cite verbatim<sup>7</sup>. I will return to this point shortly.

Last year’s Synod, in its final message on October 26, 2012, gave a brief summary of what the New Evangelization asks of us. In paragraph two, the message states: “The changed social, cultural, economic, civil and religious scenarios call us to something new: to live our common experience of faith in a renewed way and to proclaim it through an evangelization that is ‘new in its ardor, in its methods, in its expressions’, as John Paul II said” (Discourse to the XIX Assembly of CELAM, Port-au-Prince, 9 March 1983, n. 3). Paragraph 12 of the final message added forcefully: “The... symbol of authenticity of the new evangelization is the face of the poor”. Placing ourselves side by side with those who are wounded by life is not only a social exercise, but above all a spiritual act because it is Christ’s face that shines in the face of the poor: “Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40).

We must recognize the privileged place of the poor in our communities, a place that does not exclude anyone, but wants to reflect how Jesus bound himself to them. The presence of the poor in our communities is mysteriously powerful: “It changes persons more than a discourse does, it teaches fidelity, it makes us understand the fragility of life, it asks for pray, it brings us to Christ”. That synodal statement certainly sounds very “Vincentian”!

All the modern popes have insisted that gestures of charity must also be accompanied by commitment to justice. Hence, the social doctrine of the Church is integral to new evangelization. Looking back over the last hundred years, Pope John Paul II wrote in *Centesimus Annus*: “To teach and to spread her social doctrine pertains to the Church’s evangelizing mission and is an essential part of the Christian mes-

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<sup>6</sup> *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 63.

<sup>7</sup> *Constitutions* 10, 11, 16.

sage”<sup>8</sup>. He adds: “The ‘new evangelization’... must include among its elements a *proclamation of the Church’s social doctrine*”<sup>9</sup>. Those are strong words. It would be hard to put the matter more clearly.

To us, it is fascinating to analyze how strongly *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and the terminology of the New Evangelization have influenced our Constitutions and other official documents of the Congregation of the Mission in recent years. Our documents over the last 25 years have a number of significantly new accents, placing emphasis on:

- following Christ as the Evangelizer of the Poor
- seeing the poor as not merely the object of evangelization, but its subject
- being evangelized by the poor
- teaching the link between evangelization and action for justice
- searching out the causes of poverty and concrete solutions
- investigating new forms of poverty
- becoming specialists in the Church’s social teaching
- forming basic Christian communities
- acquiring a global world-view.

We suggest to you today that Vincentian Family emphasis on Systemic Change is a concretization of the call to a New Evangelization.

## II.

### SOME SEEDS OF SYSTEMIC CHANGE IN THE LIFE AND WORKS OF ST. VINCENT

The concept of “systemic change” is a modern one. It was unknown to St. Vincent and his contemporaries. Like all of us today, Vincent accepted as given, and sometimes as God-given, many of the structures that surrounded him. They were like the air he breathed. For the most part, he simply took them for granted. Vincent was born and died in a multi-tiered society, with a monarchy, nobility, clerics and peasants. He would never have dreamed about changing those structures radically, as revolutionary France did 150 years later.

But, within the context of his time, Vincent expressed many ideas related to systemic change. It is useful for us to examine these seminal thoughts, since they help us to situate a systemic change mentality in

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<sup>8</sup> *Centesimus Annus* 5.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

the spirituality of the Vincentian Family today. So, today I want to describe eight seeds of Systemic Change in the life and works of St. Vincent. I will give each of the seeds a name, using the terminology that St. Vincent used and then I will relate it to the terminology found in systemic change projects today. One could do similar things in regard to the life and works of Louise de Marillac, Frederick Ozanam, and other heroes in the Vincentian Family.

### **1. Affective and effective love: changing social structures**

You are all familiar with the phrase, which Vincent repeated over and over again; we are called to a love that is both “affective and effective”. He says, for example, “The love of a Daughter of Charity is not only tender; it is effective, because they serve the poor concretely”. Today, we are conscious that sin affects not just individuals; it deeply affects social structures. It becomes embodied in unjust laws, power-based economic relationships, inequitable treaties, artificial boundaries, oppressive governments, and numerous other subtle obstacles to harmonious societal relationships. Many of these unjust societal structures keep the poor living in poverty.

Luke’s parable of the Good Samaritan dramatizes the principle that love of God is displayed in love of neighbor. But today we recognize more and more that effective love involves not just binding up the individual victim’s wounds and pouring oil on them, but also making sure that the road from Jerusalem to Jericho is safe for all in the future.

### **2. Integral evangelization by word and work: witness, preaching and human promotion**

Vincent was deeply convinced that what we say and what we do must reinforce one another. Witness authenticates words. What we say is credible only if our actions corroborate it. In other words, Vincent sees witness, service, preaching and teaching as complementary to one another, and as integral to the evangelization process. Today, the unity between witness, evangelization and human promotion, so much a part of Vincent’s spirit, is one of the main emphases in the Church’s social teaching. First, do. Then, teach. That is Vincent’s rule for “effective” evangelization. So, Vincent encouraged his followers to examine various elements in the lives of the poor to see what their most urgent needs were: nourishment, health care, education, job opportunities, and spiritual care. He focused on the whole person and wanted to treat the person holistically.

### **3. The “Chatillon” organization**

When he gathered the initial group of women to form a “Confraternity of Charity” at Chatillon-les-Dombes in November 1617, Vincent stated, in the Rule he composed for them, that the poor sometimes suffer more from a lack of “order” in the help offered them than from a lack of charitable persons who want to help. So, he organized them. He believed that well-intentioned charity must also be well-organized, that it must be planned and executed with precision and care. Vincent was a precise planner and organizer. This was one of his greatest gifts. It helped make his works effective. Vincent wanted quality, competence, gentleness and respect to characterize the service provided in a project. He insisted that not only should we do good, but that we should do it well, with adequate resources and at the same time with warmth and concern.

### **4. Writing contracts and rules: establishing solid foundations as a basis for sustainability**

Through his life, Vincent negotiated detailed contracts and wrote precise rules as he set up all the groups he founded. He wanted those groups to be firmly established so that their service to others would be long-lasting. The contracts provided for the financial stability of the groups. The Rules conveyed the structure and described the charism and the spirit of the groups he founded. Both contracts and the Rules played a foundational role in preserving these groups into the future. It is helpful to note Vincent saw no conflict between trusting in Divine Providence and providing for the future by laying firm financial foundation and setting up structures that would make his projects last. Today, all organizations that are initiating project put great emphasis on sustainability.

### **5. Simplicity & transparency**

Vincent tells us again and again that the poor are attracted to those who speak and live simply, who are transparent in what they say and do. This is also one of the fundamental aspects of successful systemic change projects: their leaders have developed the ability to listen to the poor, to speak with them simply and transparently, and to involve them in the project at every stage, from initial discernment of needs, to planning the project, carrying it out, and evaluating and adjusting it. Today, transparency in formulating budgets, in using resources and reporting to others, (including the poor); about how those resources are being used is one of the key themes of Systemic Change.

## **6. Petites écoles: education and job-training**

Vincent and Louise de Marillac were deeply committed to the education and formation of poor young people, especially so that they might have the skills to work. For that reason, with Vincent's support, Louise founded the "petites écoles" and made the instruction of poor young people one of the principal works of the first Daughters of Charity. So, right from the beginning, schools have been a part of the charism of the Vincentian Family. Louise taught in these schools herself. She insisted that the instruction given should be clear and practical.

Today, schools of the Vincentian Family have over a million members. Beyond the schools, the Vincentian Marian Youth groups offer formation to more than 120,000 young people. Education and job-training are extremely important to bring about systemic change. In *Populorum Progressio*, Pope Paul VI wrote: "Lack of education is as serious as lack of food; the illiterate person is a starved spirit". St. Vincent and St. Louise were concerned not only about the education of the poor, but about the education and formation of the servants of the poor; that is, of us, the members of the groups they founded or inspired. The formation of leaders is crucial in systemic change projects.

## **7. Collaboration in all strata of society: networking**

Vincent knew how to network. He brought together rich and poor, young and old, clergy and lay, men and women. He had the ability to recognize and call forth people's gifts. He saw that collaboration was the key to success in serving the poor. So, he forged bonds, built bridges, and fostered unity among very diverse groups of people. He knew how to draw these people into his captivating vision of life. On his one side was Anne, the Queen of France, a woman of broad culture and also of political intrigue; on his other side was Marguerite Naseau, a peasant girl who did not know how to read or write. He drew together women and men of every rank in society, by sharing his vision with them and getting them excited about it. He was a wonderful networker. Networking and collaboration are crucial in successful systemic change projects, not just within the Vincentian Family, but with other religious and civic groups, foundations, and governments on various levels.

## **8. His role at court: advocacy**

While Vincent is best known for his practical works of charity, he also served as an advocate for the poor before the highest authorities, at times at considerable risk to himself. On several occasions he inter-

vened personally to try to bring about peace, when war was wrecking the lives of the poor. He went right to the top.

One of Vincent's biographers relates a striking episode, taken from an account written by Vincent's secretary. In 1649, during the civil war, Vincent left Paris quietly, crossed battle lines (at almost 70 years of age) and forded a flooded river on horseback to see the Queen and to beg her to dismiss Mazarin, whom he regarded as responsible for the war. He also spoke directly to Mazarin himself. But his pleas went unheeded. Vincent attempted to speak with leaders on both sides and at times felt that a settlement was near, but ambitions and intrigues thwarted his efforts. His attempts at peacemaking earned him the enmity of Mazarin, who, in his secret diary, records him as an enemy. By the time peace finally came, Vincent had been removed from the Council of Conscience.

All those involved in systemic change projects today emphasize the importance of advocacy and building a shared vision with diverse stakeholders: poor communities, individuals, donors, churches, governments, private sector, unions, media, international organizations and networks.

Those are eight seeds of systemic change in the life and works of St. Vincent. I encourage you today to reflect on these eight seeds, which are fundamental in a systemic-change mentality. Seeds are small. They develop only gradually. Like seeds, creative beginnings are recognized only later when they have grown into full-scale creative works. A seed is beautiful not when it is thrown into the ground, but when it blooms as a flowering tree. So too, a germinal systemic change project, like a seed, will bear fruit only if it is nurtured, watered and tended patiently. All of the Commission engaged in successful systemic-change works say: Start small. Move forward patiently step by step.

So we urge you to encourage the confreres of your provinces: sow many seeds. As you work with them, let your ears be open, as were the ears of St. Vincent and St. Louise, to new, creative ideas. Urge the confreres to support new initiatives begun by others. In these challenging times, encourage creativity, and be courageous and persistent in putting creative ideas into practice. Examine with the confreres of your province the plight of the poor in its concrete context, but examine it as a whole field, a system. Then, seek, with the confreres and with the poor, to plant seeds that will transform the entire field and make it blossom anew.



### III. THE 'HOW' OF SYSTEMIC CHANGE

We suggest that we can promote a systemic change mentality in three different areas: formation, collaboration, action. Regarding *formation*, let's consider formation and some tools.

*Teaching systemic change in initial and ongoing formation:* Systemic change is not something ("content") that we have to learn, among other things ("knowledge"). Rather, it is a way of working or, even better, an approach, a style of working (a "mentality"). As such, it is acquired in the course of life, especially in the formation process. We acquire a systemic change mentality in two ways: by studying it (theoretically) and by experiencing it (practically). For this reason, training in this methodology is very important over the course of one's whole lifetime. It should be part of the initial and ongoing training programs of the confreres. It is very important that our confreres be acquainted with this methodology at every stage of formation. We believe that knowledge of and training in a systemic change methodology should not be missing at any stage in the formation process of our confreres. A concrete way to do this would be to insert a chapter (or a section) on this issue both in the *CM Ratio Formationis* and into formation programs formulated at a provincial level. Of course, concrete experiences "in the field" by the confreres, both during their initial formation, as well as afterwards during their ongoing formation, have an important role if this methodology is to become a natural and spontaneous mentality among our confreres.

Some means and materials that are available: One of the goals of the Commission for Promoting Systemic Change is precisely to make available materials that can be used both on a personal and provincial level for the training of confreres and communities. Among the tools that the Commission has developed since it began in 2005, I would like to recommend to you the book *Seeds of Hope: Stories of Systemic Change*. It is now available in English, Spanish, French and Portuguese. It is currently being translated into Korean and Vietnamese. It is not a theoretical study, but it begins with successful stories of systemic change projects. Then, from the stories, it deduces 20 strategies that made the projects successful. Here is a summary of the table of contents:

#### Prologue

1. Akamasoa, a Community of Good Friends
2. I Have a DREAM
3. Mission-Oriented Strategies
4. The Perfect Storm



5. AIC Madagascar, a Story of Systemic Change within an Association
6. Person-Oriented Strategies
7. The Story of the Passage
8. The Homeless Peoples' Federation of the Philippines
9. Task-Oriented Strategies
10. The Clancy Nightshelter
11. The Mindoro Project in the Philippines
12. Strategies Directed toward Co-responsibility, Networking and Political Action
13. The Vincentian Mission at the United Nations

*A Tool Kit.* To accompany the book, the Commission offers tools for teaching others about systemic change. At first, they envisioned a box containing documents, brochures, questionnaires, and DVDs with films and PowerPoint presentations, etc. But, finally, they decided on a 2 gigabyte memory stick containing all those same materials. This choice proved very advantageous, since it enabled the Commission to encourage those receiving it to modify materials to fit their own culture. It was distributed in Mexico in 2009 and is available in English, French, Spanish and Portuguese.

Regarding *collaboration*, we suggest two issues: collaboration within the Vincentian family and the organization of systemic change workshops. These two issues illustrate an important aspect of how a mentality (at a personal level) and a culture (at a social level) are formed. The importance of collaboration within the Vincentian Family in promoting a systemic change mentality: A mentality is a personal way of seeing, judging and acting. But none of us can form our own mentality by ourselves; rather, it is formed in primary and secondary relationships that helps develop our individuality. A mentality is not the result of just one person's influence on us. It is a vision influenced by many persons.

St. Vincent would not have been what he was, without the relationships he had with many people, including many lay people. A mentality develops through concrete experience; i.e. through the experience of those who work "in the field". Today, among the persons "in the field" most committed to eliminating the causes of poverty and promoting the welfare of the poor are our Vincentian lay groups. Lay Vincentians are, in large number, the "operational arm" of the Vincentian charism and have significant experiences to share with us regarding systemic change. If we really want to open ourselves to this mentality, we cannot fail to collaborate with them.

Furthermore, poverty today is complex, and in our efforts to eliminate its causes, can only be through collaborative action. That is why networking is so important. For this reason, today fund-raising activities aimed at obtaining (public and private) contributions are usually successful only if we can demonstrate that the project is a shared one, carried out in partnership with others. As Vincentians, we have a great potential to act together against the causes of poverty, but often we do not use that potential, as we don't know how or because our formation has not prepared us to do so.

A major challenges for our Vincentian works among the poor in the years ahead will be our ability to work together as a Vincentian Family and overcome individualism, skepticism, and resistance, so that our Vincentian action in the world in the serving the poor will be truly effective. I am convinced that, beyond what we write in our documents statements about what we intend to do, in many provinces much still needs to be done to foster collaboration.

- Organizing systemic change workshops in your Province for members of the Vincentian Family. I encourage you, when you return to your Provinces to organize systemic change workshops for the members of our Family.
- A mentality develops from shared endeavors, both theoretical and practical. It is experience that forms a mentality. As Vincentians, common formation is very important for unified, shared action. Good formation programs enable us to create a Vincentian mentality among and around us. A mentality is not theory, but a concrete way of seeing life. As Vincentians, we need to move from the notion of systemic change to its practice. A process of "inculturation" is needed. To move toward this goal, the Commission for Promoting Systemic Change organizes local workshops wherever it is invited. The Commission has had good experiences in this regard. We have a great role to play as animators of the various Vincentian Family branches, especially you, the Visitors. As Visitors, you can appoint the Spiritual Assistants or Councilors for the Vincentian Associations, and verify that their service is adequate and in line with the demands of the Vincentian charism and the Church.
- From its experience and from the evaluation of the participants, the Commission sees that the workshops it has given have been a very effective way of adapting the systemic change methodology to different local realities. At the same time, the Commission is convinced that the role of the Visitors is a decisive factor in the success of the workshops organized so far.

Regarding *action*, we focus on projects and consider two possibilities: transforming already existing projects into systemic change projects, and formulating new systemic change projects.

The worldwide Vincentian Family has projects against poverty on five continents, but not all are systemic change projects. There is a big difference between what we call assisting projects to help the poor and systemic change projects. "Assisting" projects focus solely on the relief of immediate needs. Such projects are good and at times necessary, but they are not enough. The second kind of projects, systemic change projects, meets certain criteria. The most important criteria are:

- that the project promotes change in the overall life-situation of those who benefit from it (long-range social impact);
- that the project creates social structures that are needed for a permanent change in the life of poor (sustainability);
- that the project can be adapted to solve similar problems in different places (replicability);
- to involve the poor themselves, especially the young and women, in every phase of the project;
- to have a broad vision of the human person; in other words, the project should meet a series of basic human needs, such as jobs, money, food, health care and education;
- to have shared goals with diverse stakeholders (interested individuals, donors, churches, governments, the private sector, union, media, international organizations and networks...).

These criteria are useful not only in setting up new systemic change projects, but also as criteria for assessing existing projects and transforming them into systemic change projects. How? By periodically reviewing our projects to assess their positive and negative aspects. As problems arise or circumstances change, we must have the courage to adjust our goals, methods and means.

Right now, the Congregation of the Mission is engaged in a process of reconfiguration. It is very important at this moment in our history not only that we commit ourselves to live and work within new juridical boundaries in our provinces, but that we commit ourselves to create new forms of ministry as we re-dedicate ourselves to mission and charity. In this context, a systemic change methodology can be a powerful new approach to our works among the poor, as we address current needs from both an ecclesiological and sociological point of view.

To sum up, in works among the poor, systemic change aims beyond providing food, clothing and shelter to alleviate the immediate needs

of the poor. It focuses on assisting the needy to change the overall structures within which they live, so that they can emerge from poverty.

As Visitors of the Congregation, you have a very significant role. Together with your Provincial Council you will make decisions about which projects to promote, to support financially, to modify (and how to modify them), and which ones to abandon. This is a great responsibility and we believe that in taking on this responsibility you will be contributing to the New Evangelization which the universal Church commits us to in the present era.

We close now with a prayer for systemic change:

### **A Prayer for Systemic Change**

*We praise and thank you, O God,  
Creator of the Universe.  
You have made all things good  
and have given us the earth to cultivate.  
Grant that we may always use created things gratefully,  
and share them generously with those in need.  
Give us creativity in helping the poor  
meet their basic human needs.  
Open our minds and hearts so that we might  
stand at their side and assist them to change  
whatever unjust structures keep them poor.  
Enable us to be brothers and sisters to them,  
friends who walk with them in their  
struggle for fundamental human rights.  
We ask this through Christ our Lord.*

**AMEN.**