

FROM THE SUPERIOR GENERAL

Letter to the Vincentian Family for the Feast of St. Vincent

Rome, 18 July 2014

Dear Members of the Vincentian family,

As we celebrate the feast of St. Vincent de Paul, on behalf of the Vincentian Family and the leaders of our various branches, I write to inform you that we have decided to dedicate this coming year to the “New Evangelization.” We will do so as a Vincentian Family by focusing on three key areas of fidelity in following Jesus Christ, evangelizer and servant of the poor:

- *a need for personal and communal conversion;*
- *a need to go beyond ourselves by listening to the cry of the poor, especially those who live on the periphery of our cities, and on the margins of society today;*
- *a need to evangelize and provide new ways of pastoral care for the family.*

From October 5-19, 2014, Pope Francis will convene a Synod of Bishops to discuss “pastoral challenges of the family in the context of evangelization.” This is a significant theme advanced by Our Holy Father for the good of the Church, as this Synod will demonstrate.

Early in his pontificate, Pope St. John Paul II initiated the call for a ‘new evangelization’ to encourage a fresh fervor and innovative ways to encounter Jesus, to deepen our relationship with Christ, and grow in living our Christian faith. This call of John Paul II came at a time of general malaise among Christians, particularly in countries in the developed world. John Paul II believed Christians were becoming less fervent in their practice of the faith, so he called for conversion and a new evangelization. These dynamics for renewal have been articulated and encouraged by both of his successors, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI and Pope Francis.

A key aspect of this new initiative is to rediscover and re-encounter Jesus with love in our hearts, deepening our relationship with him to grow in discipleship. It is a personal deepening of our faith in the God of Jesus Christ, a fruit of the Holy Spirit. This love guides us on the path

of devotion to God and to others, especially the poor. As truly committed Christians and disciples of Jesus, we share the Good News of God's love, found in the Holy Scriptures and sacraments. The role of every baptized Catholic who lives faithfully is to make Jesus known to all people.

To do so, the Church calls us to conversion, a new way to encounter and believe in God and share the Good News with others. To live this experience of conversion and follow a new way to encounter God, we must leave our comfort zones and listen as the Lord speaks to us in the depths of our hearts. As Vincentians and members of the Vincentian Family, how can we respond to this call to conversion and new evangelization? The charism that St. Vincent de Paul shared with St. Louise de Marillac and that was carried on by Blessed Frederic Ozanam, along with many others in the Vincentian tradition, was to care for the poor and needy. However, this also included the "care of souls" as an essential part of the mission.

In the Vincentian vocation, mission and charity are inseparable. The corporal and spiritual works of mercy and service are always united. These words of instruction to Daughters of Charity in their service of the poor speak to us: a "primary concern to make God known to them, to proclaim the Gospel, and to make the Kingdom present" (*DC Constitutions*, 10a). Blessed Frederic Ozanam stressed that material aid was not the only aspect of the Society's service to the poor. Rather, he reminded them that their spirituality and loving Christian witness to the love of God helped many Christians return to the faith, and served to evangelize many non-Christians. This is a key virtue of our Vincentian spirituality: to develop and deepen our relationship with Jesus, and help others to encounter Christ. This is faith in action.

There are many challenges for us in everyday life. But now is a favorable time to announce the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ. Although we live in the midst of an environment often indifferent to religion, people still have a true thirst for higher values. There is a hunger for God among God's people, especially as they aspire to a new way of life, one different from the prevailing societal norms. We could give in to the way people today live this environment of religious indifference, and acclimate ourselves to accept how little importance people show toward the essential questions of faith and the meaning of life in this world.

But are we aware of the reality of what happens when people forget God? Many times, this is indicative of true spiritual and material poverty. St. Vincent was deeply affected by the situation of people in his day: those who lived in misery and ignorance, and who did not know anything of God, nor of God's love. It was for this reason that Vincent said with strength and conviction, "It is true then, that I am sent not only to love God, but to make him loved. It is not enough for me to love God if my neighbor doesn't love him" (SV, XII, Conf. May 30, 1659).

If we had only a little of this love, would we look away with our arms crossed? Never! Charity cannot be idle. Charity moves us to look for the comfort and salvation of those who suffer. Our vocation as Vincentians is to inflame the hearts of others: to do what the Son of God himself did. He came to bring fire to the world, to inflame it with his love. What should we hope for ourselves, except to burn for Christ and to be consumed by that love.

As members of the Vincentian Family, we are called to be agents of evangelization by providing loving service. Charity is the principal value of life and the challenge for the Christian community to make active in today's world. Never should we separate nor oppose the intrinsic relationship between faith and charity. We are Jesus' disciples when we extend God's love, and commit ourselves to fully participate in the life and mission of the Church. We have been conquered by Christ's love! Accordingly, under the power of that love, we are profoundly open to loving our neighbor in concrete ways. Here, we can recall the motto of the Daughters of Charity, words taken from Scripture: "The love of Christ crucified impels us" (cf. 2 Cor. 5:14).

Faith enables us to recognize the gifts that our good and generous God has entrusted to us. Charity makes them fruitful. Through faith, we enter into friendship with the Lord. In the virtue of charity, this friendship is cultivated and lived out. The relationship between faith and charity is magnified in this intimate link. This is what it means to make the Gospel effective in people's lives. The encyclical *Lumen Fidei* speaks of the repercussions of faith in the world, telling us that, "The light of faith is concretely placed at the service of justice, law, and peace" (LF, 2013, 51). The apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* speaks about the service of charity as a constitutive element of the Church's mission, reflecting the essence of who we are as a Church.

As the Church is missionary by its nature, it is also indelibly linked to the virtue of charity, particularly in providing effective charity for our neighbor. When we accept the challenge of mission imbued with the charity of Christ, we can identify with and serve those living in poverty. Thus, our Vincentian hearts accept with joy the call of *Evangelii Gaudium*, to be instruments of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, to enable them to attain integral promotion into society (EG, 2013, 182). Thus, we should be docile and attentive, listening to the cries of the poor and willing to run to their aid. We do that by leaving our own comfort zones, going to the periphery and the margins to meet those living in poverty.

We go out of ourselves and to the poor with haste with a burning love of God. In the fourth chapter of *Evangelii Gaudium*, we find a number of ideas that are consonant with our charism. The words in this chapter seem to describe the lives and actions of Saints Vincent and Louise, along with our other saints and beati. Here is a sample of what

Chapter 4 tells us: the poor are those preferred by God; the poor occupy a privileged place in the Church; and the poor are our evangelizers. If those ideas from *Evangelii Gaudium* sound familiar to you, they should!

The New Evangelization is an initiative to help us recognize the salvific force those living in poverty have in Christ, and to put them at the center of the Church. We discover Christ in the poor; we give voice to their causes; we are their servants; we listen to them; and they call us to ponder the mysterious wisdom of God, often revealed to us by their very lives.

In the context of the sufferings and struggles that families endure today, the New Evangelization can meet an urgent need, as demonstrated by the preparatory document on pastoral care of the family for the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. The doctrines of the Church regarding marriage must be presented in an efficient and understandable way to reach the hearts of many, and transform their lives according to the will of God made manifest in Jesus Christ. Additional Church documents speak of the pastoral needs of the family as an essential dimension of evangelization. It is a call to renew our understanding of the sacrament of marriage and the Christian vocation of married couples and to strengthen the family for Church and society. As members of the Vincentian Family, we should ask ourselves what we could do to evangelize the families we serve and those with whom we will come in contact.

Here I speak of the families we encounter in our parishes, schools, social services, and many other ministries where we collaborate as a Vincentian Family to serve those living in poverty. Without a doubt, the family is an immense field for mission. Many families whom we serve today need protection, and suffer many disturbances. They are often threatened, even to the point of death. As a Vincentian Family, we can and must move forward to establish “Lines of Action” that give an impulse to pastoral work with families, and in particular, those who live in poverty.

With all the Vincentian Family, we pray the Church will seek authentic ways to adopt the pastoral means to help families cope with their present realities in the light of faith, and with the strength that comes from the Gospel. As we celebrate the feast of St. Vincent de Paul, we must dedicate ourselves in this year to the New Evangelization. We need creative responses to meet the challenges presented by the new evangelization, and personal and communal conversion to meet the pastoral needs of the family, especially those living on the periphery of our society.

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

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Superior General