

Homily of the Superior General for the Opening of the Vincentian Month
(Paris, 7-26 July 2002)

Readings: Hosea 2:16-18, 21-22; Matthew 9:18-26

My brothers and sisters, it is good that we begin this time together with the Eucharist so that the word of God might fill our minds and hearts. This gathering is not just a meeting, but an opportunity for growth, an experience of the renewing presence of the Lord. In today's readings, the word of God lays before us two themes that are crucial for our growth and renewal. Let me say a brief word about each.

1. Today's first reading is very deceptive. It sounds almost like a peaceful love song: "Thus says the Lord: I will allure her. I will lead her into the desert and speak to her heart." But actually the prophet Hosea is speaking about his own people Israel and he has just called Israel a harlot, a prostitute, who decks herself out with jewels and covers herself with makeup and runs after every foreign god who passes by. Hosea is bitter because his own people have abandoned Yahweh, the God who loves them. And because Israel's worship of foreign gods included sexual rites, a fertility cult to Baal, Hosea expresses his anger by calling Israel a prostitute. I am sure that most of his hearers were not happy to be called by that name!

Yet precisely because of this sexual reference, Hosea has written some of the Old Testament's tenderest passages. Yahweh wants his beloved back, Hosea tells his audience. He describes Yahweh's longing for his people as the yearning of a husband for his bride. Hosea, perhaps more than any other prophet, assures us of the deep love that is at the root of God's covenanted union with his people. God is tender, understanding, unshakably faithful despite what at times seems like a tragic mismatch with a people that is sinful, straying, easily seduced by more immediately attractive partners.

God is utterly persevering, utterly attentive. Listen to these wonderful words of Hosea: "I will allure her. I will lead her into the desert and will speak to her heart."

I ask you to hear God speaking these words to us today. You begin three weeks of tiring work together. Even though we are right here in the heart of Paris, these weeks will be a desert for many of you: surely hot, dry too as you sit most of the time listening, reading, writing. There will probably be days, experience teaches us, when we wander around in circles in the

desert and begin to get tired and bored. But there will be other days when God's presence is clear and when he says "I am with you, I love you deeply. I espouse you and I want you to tell the whole world, especially the poor, that my love for them is unrelenting. Nothing can overcome it."

St. Vincent uses today's text from Hosea in two conferences, one to the Daughters of Charity (IX, 219) and one to the members of the Congregation of the Mission (XI, 94). On both occasions, Vincent was saying this: "We are about to begin a desert experience together. Listen, listen to the Lord. Listen, and let him speak." So I say to you as we begin this meeting: listen well. The Lord wants to speak to you in many ways and to teach you how to be a good Advisor ("Asesor") to our Vincentian groups. He wants to speak to you through the cries of the most abandoned, cries that all of you hear so often and can share with one another in these days. He speaks to you through one another. He speaks to you through the word that will be read each day in our liturgy. He speaks to you through the wider Church that is calling us in these days to be renewed and to plan for our mission in the third millennium.

This first reading is all about spirituality. The Lord wants to allure us. He wants to dig deeper roots in our hearts. He wants to speak to us directly and to teach us about advising, counseling, assisting others.

2. If the first reading is all about spirituality, then the second is all about mission. In fact, the two miracles in the gospel take place just before the great missionary discourse of Matthew's gospel. Jesus is showing his prospective missionaries, in action, what it means to minister. Jesus' heart is moved with pity, Matthew tells us in this chapter, at the sight of the crowds who are prostrate from exhaustion like sheep without a shepherd. So he heals this discouraged woman who has suffered from hemorrhages for twelve years and he says to her, "Courage, my daughter. Your faith has restored you to health." And then he raises up from the dead the daughter of the leader of the synagogue who said to him in faith: "Just lay your hand upon her and she will come back to life."

Notice the missionary Jesus. He is not daunted by sickness, nor by death. In fact, he tells us that his love breaks chains, it opens the doors of prisons, it sets captives free. It changes the hearts of sinners. Because of Jesus' love, those who weep, laugh; those who mourn, rejoice; those who hunger and thirst for justice have their fill.

A central focus of the mission of each of us here at this meeting is to advise, to counsel, to encourage, to animate our Vincentian lay groups. One of the great challenges of this meeting will be to concretize our mission, as did Jesus, so that it becomes not just a vague ideal but a

practical, effective healing sign of the presence of God among his people.

My brothers and sisters, these days together, like this Eucharist, are a communal celebration. We listen to the word of God together. We discern together. We formulate concrete goals together. And we offer one another mutual support in living out the mission that God has given us Advisors. I encourage you, therefore, to listen with confidence today and each day. Listen to the words of the prophet Hosea. This is God's word spoken to us: "I will allure you. I will lead you into the desert and speak to your heart. I will espouse you in fidelity and you shall know the Lord." That is what the Lord promises us in these days. We must allow him to speak to our hearts and to fan the missionary zeal that lies there into a flame, so that together we can make the worldwide Vincentian Family a powerful instrument in the service of the poor.

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