

Together with the Poor on the Road to Peace ¹

by G. Gregory Gay, C.M.

Superior General

I would like to speak to this topic from the perspective of our own Vincentian spirituality. In any number of different places St. Vincent calls his followers to be contemplatives in action. It would be a mistake to see our spirituality, contemplatives in action, as two different entities. To truly understand our spirituality, we have to see it as one, contemplation-action. Our relationship with the poor is always seen in this context. We are called to contemplate our experience with the poor, which at the same time motivates us to act together with the poor. It is essential that we be clear that this is the context in which we develop our own spirituality and it is the same context in which I would like today to develop the theme that I have been given: "Together with the poor on the road to peace."

I will begin with a bit of an analysis of the title itself. First of all, as stated, "together with the poor." It is of utmost importance, in terms of our being able to be effective in our service to the poor, that we be close to them, that we be with them, that above all we treat them as they are, our "Lords and Masters," with utmost respect, seeing them as protagonists of their own lives, rather than objects of the living out of our own spirituality. Taking a step further, "together with the poor" will certainly involve what St. Vincent meant when he said that we should love God, but we should do it with the sweat of our brow and the strength of our arms. Our working together with the poor, from their own situations of marginalization, necessarily means a lot of blood, sweat and tears.

In our closeness with the poor, we will come to know them better and experience the different aspects of their lives: the good and the bad, the redeemed, the unredeemed, their lights and their shadows. Among the shadows that we certainly would discover would be the level of violence that exists in most of the contexts

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where the poor live and work and make strides to struggle to survive. I single out the point of violence, because it is important to come to a recognition of violence not only in the lives of the poor, but in our own lives as well, if we want to take seriously the task at hand: "Together with the poor on the road to peace."

The second part of the title, "on the road," speaks to me of a process, a process which takes into consideration our own personal growth processes, our growing together in the process of community or association, together with the process of drawing close to the poor. Growth processes are painstaking. They involve a lot of learning, a lot of listening and a lot of giving, a lot of taking and certainly a lot of patience. What is truly good never comes easy. The consequence of patient struggle, together with the poor "on the road," is peace and harmony one with another. If we are willing to work through the processes together, then we will be true witnesses that peace among human beings is possible.

From a Christian perspective we use here as a model — and as more than a model, an inspiration — the doctrine of the Trinity. Just as the Trinity was one of the favorite doctrines of St. Vincent de Paul, I see it becoming such for me as well. You may know that Vincent de Paul had a special devotion to the Trinity. Here is what he said in a conference on May 23, 1659: "What is it that produces unity and community in God? Is it not the equality and distinction of the Three Persons? What produces their mutual love, if not their perfect resemblance? If they did not possess mutual love, what would be lovable in them? Unanimity, therefore, exists in the blessed Trinity; what the Father wills, the Son wills; what the Holy Spirit does, the Father and the Son do; they act in the same manner; they have but one and the same power, one and the same operation. Behold then the beginning of perfection and our model."

What is instructive here is that the symbol of the Trinity — for so many of us a doctrine on the sidelines, and not very well attended to — was for St. Vincent not only an object for contemplation but a warrant for social justice, which is absolutely necessary in the construction of peace. This was so often stated by Pope Paul VI and equally repeated by Pope John Paul II. The inner life of the Godhead is a right and loving relationship. People made in God's image must strive to live in a like manner with each other. If these "right and just" relationships are out of sync, there must be an endeavor to put these relationships right, so that God's will might "be done on earth just as it is in heaven." When we speak of peace, which means much more than an absence of war, we are speaking of harmonious relationships, equal relationships one with another as is so clearly modeled in our Godhead, the Trinity.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are invited to do the will of God as Jesus did. Doing the will of God can be understood as imitating God, living as God in and through our own humanness with the gift of his divine grace. Certainly in the society in which we live the reality of equal relationships is not such. Many times there are those who dominate and those who are dominated; there are those who oppress and the oppressed. Even in supposedly “Christian relationships,” there exists a lack of equality, for there are “the do-gooders” who do for others in a way that is at times paternalistic or maternalistic, often doing for the other what the other could do for him or herself. This is where the need for empowerment becomes so essential.

“Empowerment” is a concept that certainly has been coined in a new way by the International Association of Charities. It is a term “which implies giving the first place to the last, to those who are our “Lords and Masters.”² Once those who are beneficiaries of our commitment of solidarity come to a recognition of their dignity and equality, we can more easily work together in a co-responsible manner. Through co-responsibility “we hope to show a path which leads to peace, real peace, which cannot exist as long as there are men and women dying of hunger, with no life opportunities and living in despair.”³

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity speaks eloquently to the concept of co-responsibility in our world today. The Trinity in itself, being the Godhead and source of grace and love for us, is the key element needed as you (AIC) walk together with the poor on the road to peace.

To be able to walk together with the poor on the road to peace there is a preliminary call to each of us to undergo a personal process of conversion. The goal that we hope to achieve — “peace together with the poor” — can have as its basis growth in the five virtues that St. Vincent de Paul recommended to the Congregation of the Mission. Most of us recall that he recommended three virtues to the Daughters of Charity: humility, simplicity and charity. For the Congregation of the Mission it was five: humility, simplicity, meekness, mortification, and zeal for souls. Each virtue integrally contributed to St. Vincent de Paul’s own personal process of conversion — the basis of his transformation.

In other writings about peace an emphasis has been placed on the role of meekness. Certainly that is a topic beautifully developed

² Assembly of Delegates, AIC, 2002, “The Social Co-Responsibility, a Path Towards Peace,” p. 2.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

by our own former Superior General, Fr. Robert Maloney.⁴ I would like to show how we can develop in our lives the five virtues as an integral way of helping us to live more clearly as persons of peace, experiencing the process within ourselves and walking together with the poor in the same process in their lives. “Together with the poor,” we give witness to what true peace is all about in this violent, war-torn world of ours.

As we all know well, St. Vincent de Paul singled out these five virtues in the life of Jesus as he meditated on the Gospels. He did so in and through the recognition that he himself did not have these particular virtues and he felt the need to develop them in order to be more faithful in following Jesus, the Evangelizer of the Poor. Sometimes the best way to understand the virtues is to speak first about their opposites, which can help come to a deeper understanding of what they are about. I would like to try that method here as I share with you what I consider to be essential; that is, the development within our Vincentian spirituality of these five virtues, helping us to be more clearly “imitators” of Jesus Christ, thus helping us to walk faithfully with the poor on the road to peace.

The gradual living out of these virtues in his life drew St. Vincent closer to Jesus himself. It was for him a true change of heart, leading him to be a more Christ-like person, a peace-filled person, a person energized with the life of Christ and with an overwhelming desire and great courage to share that Christ-likeness with others. Growing in these virtues entails a process of conversion or true change of heart for all of us. I believe that, at the basis of establishing true peace, what is important is a change of heart.

Humility

Let me begin with the virtue of humility. Its opposite is to be arrogant, or as we would say in Spanish, “prepotente.” It is seen in he or she who dominates, controls, and imposes him or herself upon another. It is sometimes interpreted as feeling more than the other or above the other, but in the eyes of God we are all equal. I find it interesting that in order to be able to strike that balance and come to an understanding that we are all equal in the eyes of God, St. Vincent de Paul reversed the scales. Normally, from the societal perspective, there is certainly an imbalance in relationships. Those at the lower end of the scale would certainly be the marginalized, the excluded, the impoverished in the world in which we live. St. Vincent, in order to help himself realize that the poor are equal, that we are all equal

⁴ Cf., ROBERT P. MALONEY, “A Vincentian Reflection on Peace,” in *Vincentiana* 48/2 (March-April) 2004, 115-127.

in the eyes of God, made the poor his “Lords and Masters,” perhaps as a deliberate way to help him to come to an equal relationship with them. At the same time, he encourages us, his brothers and sisters, Daughters of Charity, Ladies of Charity, and members of the Congregation of the Mission, whom he often spoke to of the poor as being our “Lords and Masters,” to come to the same discovery, as a way of helping us to become humble. Simply put, that means the ability to recognize not only our weaknesses, but at the same time our strengths; to recognize our limitedness, as well as our giftedness; and to be able to recognize the same in the other. It is through humility then that we can come to see that we are all equal in the eyes of God and that it is only God himself who is above us, although he chose to be one like us in all things but sin. Equal relationships is an essential ingredient in the process of building peace.

Simplicity

The second of the virtues is that of simplicity. Its opposite is understood as deceitfulness, the image of someone who is two-faced, someone who would speak or act in one way in front of you and then speak or act in a different way behind your back. The gift of simplicity calls us to be utterly sincere in our relationships one with another, transparent, open, with a capacity for saying things as they are with great compassion. As Scripture tells us, “Let your ‘Yes’ mean ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No’ mean ‘No.’”⁵ Sincerity builds trust and trust is yet another essential piece for building peace. True peace can be built up only in mutual trust.⁶

Meekness

The third virtue is that of meekness, often understood as a key virtue in bringing about peace. The opposite of meekness is aggressiveness, the one who attacks, the one who beats down another, the one who abuses either by word or action, the one who deeply hurts the other, often leaving long-lasting scars. In the imitation of Jesus, we are called to be meek, to be gentle; stepping back and putting the other first; not being afraid to draw near to another or allow the other to draw near to me. Meekness leaves one open and approachable. We can be open and approachable when we see others as they are in the deepest part of their being. Despite all the limitations, despite all the exterior roughness, people in the deepest part of their hearts are good and they are good because they

⁵ Mt 5:37.

⁶ Cf., Pope JOHN XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, 113.

have been made so by God, who is all good. The virtue of meekness is one that invites us to have an attitude of non-violence. We need to become aware of the violence within ourselves, which then can help us deal more easily with the violence in the lives of others, a violence which many times blocks possibilities of creating environments of peace and prohibits the empowerment of others being peacemakers for this world in which we live.

Mortification

The fourth virtue, that as Vincentians we are called to imitate in order to help us walk together with the poor on the road to peace, is mortification. The other side of mortification is understood as selfishness, a concern for one's own well-being, looking out for one's own personal interests or trying to preserve the interests of one's particular constituencies. These are attitudes which dominate the world in which we live today: those who look out for number one, seeing themselves at the center of the world in which they live, doing all that they do so that it benefits them, sometimes even under the guise or behind the mask of "being good and generous and all-giving." The root of the word mortification is to die to oneself, to sacrifice, to put the other first. It requires taking into consideration the needs and concerns of others. To build peace we need to struggle, to sacrifice, to give of ourselves.

Zeal for Souls

The fifth and final virtue that St. Vincent recommends to his followers is that of zeal for the apostolate or zeal for souls. The opposite could be understood as apathy and indifference, social blindness, closing the door on the reality of the lives of many with whom I share this world. Once again, as a virtue, zeal calls for putting the other first and having enthusiasm for this life in which we live. Certainly it means having a passion for this life that we can draw from a passion for Christ, from a passion for the poor. Having this passion, even in spite of all the hopeless situations in which we many times see the lives of the poor lived out, we have the capacity to hope. Zeal is a burning passion or love for the poor in whom, as St. Vincent teaches us, we can clearly see the face of Christ. Hope encourages people to continue the long journey on the road to peace. It is yet another essential piece of building peace that is true and lasting.

It is my conviction that we, as followers of St. Vincent de Paul, and you, as members of the International Association of Charities, truly hope to walk with the poor on the road to peace. We can do so in the light of the development of these five virtues which St. Vincent

himself worked toward developing in his own life. The end result will be the ability to build together with the poor relationships of peace and, therefore, give a witness to the world in which we live that peace is possible.

In order to capture clearly these virtues in the life of Jesus, we need to draw close to Him. We do that in a twofold way, as taught by St. Vincent. We draw close to Jesus by drawing close to his word. The Gospels are where we contemplate his very person. His Word is dynamic. When listened to with openness, it penetrates the deepest part of our beings and transforms us. We also contemplate Jesus in the face of those who suffer.

It is obvious, as it was obvious in the life of St. Vincent, that any human project and one so beautiful as a project of walking together with the poor to build peace, in no way can be undertaken without the recognition that our driving force is the creative grace of God. Grace comes to us in and through our contemplation of his presence in Word and in sacrament, lived out in the community of believers. We know what a great power of mercy transforms us in the Sacrament of Reconciliation;⁷ not to mention too the gift of the Eucharist, especially in this year in which we are celebrating its meaning in the lives of all committed Catholics. The sacraments unite us in love and peace around Him who is the way, the truth and the life.

To walk together with the poor is certainly a challenge, especially as we try to walk together in building peace. Our guiding light needs to be the grace of God which is God's very love for us. Pius XI stated that there cannot be true external peace between individuals and peoples where the spirit of peace does not possess minds and hearts; minds, in order to recognize and respect the rights of justice; hearts, in order that justice be linked with charity and that charity may even prevail over justice, for if peace must be the work and fruit of justice, it belongs rather to charity than to justice.⁸ Taking direction from Pope Pius XI's statement, at the very heart of building peace is charity. And charity is at the very heart of what it means to be a member of the International Association of Charities. The AIC has come a long way in its understanding of charity. I am happy to have experienced this myself in and through the recent documents of the Association, as well as in my sharing with different members of AIC both in Panama and Guatemala and other countries of Central America. All of us who live in the spirit of St. Vincent have come a long way in understanding charity, moving from a "paternalistic" or

⁷ Cf., Pope JOHN PAUL II, *From a New Heart, Peace is Born*, 1 January 1984.

⁸ Taken from a discourse of Pius XI on 24 December 1930.

“maternalistic” attitude to seeing charity as a liberating, transforming force in the lives of those whom we call our “Lords and Masters.” Charity, when it is deep within our hearts, helps to transform us personally and transform our Associations, which is so necessary, as indicated by the different documents that have been written in preparation for your Assembly this year.

Before concluding I venture to go a bit further with how we might understand charity from a Gospel perspective. St. Vincent, as we well know, was very practical in his dealings with the poor, as well as very practical in giving concrete examples to his Family members so that they might live more deeply in the spirit of Jesus Christ, Evangelizer of the Poor. So we might truly be able to walk together with the poor on the road to peace, may I suggest three types of action in the name of charity.

The first would be political action. We are all called to feel concern for our brothers and sisters, especially those most marginalized by society, because we are all one and the same human family, even though we might live at different ends of the world. In order to bring about right relationships between peoples, we are called to take action, especially political action in order to confront the causes of poverty and rally in solidarity for justice for the poor, who are often made poor by the unjust systems, whether social, political, or economic, generated by the selfish hearts of men.

As we work to renew hearts, we are also called to renew systems, institutions and methods in order to live in this world with equality, in a sense of global solidarity among those who have and those who have not, in mutual trust and fraternal love. At times, for some people, the word “political” seems to be incompatible with charity. That may be when we understand “political” as politicizing. A challenge for the International Association of Charities would be to continue to work politically to change unjust structures. A real concrete way is in and through the support you show your own NGO at the United Nations. Together with other members of the Vincentian Family and other groups with NGO status, we can work to diminish and even eliminate the causes of poverty in the name of charity. That is all part of the process of building peace with the poor.

A second type of action in the name of charity, which frees the poor to be empowered to act on their own behalf, we can call “educational” action. I encourage all of you in AIC who have different “types of schools” to continue to work for the promotion of human dignity and the well-being of all peoples, especially of women. To quote John Paul II, women have an important role in contributing to the process of peace in the world. “Women, who are intimately connected to the mystery of life, can do much to advance the spirit of

peace, in their care to insure the preservation of life and in their conviction that real love is the only power which can make the world livable for everyone.”⁹

A third type of action, again in the name of charity, are those concrete actions performed directly in the service of the poor, especially in situations of crisis, where they are empowered to be who they are through the sense of solidarity that they experience from good women like all of you present here today.

Charity is an essential component in the construction of peace. The challenge before all of you, my sisters and brothers, as members of the International Association of Charities, is to act in solidarity with the poor, initiating processes that lead toward the construction of peace. As I hope to have stated here in these reflections of mine, our own Vincentian spirituality, and the very person of Vincent de Paul himself, can be our main source of inspiration in carrying out the challenge that is before us all: becoming more Christ-like in and through the living out of the five characteristic virtues reflected on in this presentation. We set the stage for becoming persons of peace ourselves. We have to encourage one another in the Association to continue to grow in being persons of peace. At the same time, we are called to draw close to, to reach out to the poor, who are often ridden with much violence in their own lives and robbed of this great gift of peace that God desires for all his children.

Conclusion

Together with the poor we can build communities of peace, realizing that it is a project that can only be accomplished with the help of God's grace and love. Our challenge is to transform God's love into concrete acts of charity, whether these actions be political, educational, or in direct, loving service of the poor. May Jesus, who is the Prince of Peace, and Mary, Our Mother, the Queen of Peace, be ever at our sides as we try to witness to the fact that charity is the only force capable of bringing fulfillment to persons and societies, the only force capable of directing the course of history in the way of truth, justice and peace. Jesus himself is the true embodiment of charity and so we are called to imitate him, imitate him in the virtues that are evidenced in the Gospels, especially the virtues that transformed the person of Vincent de Paul into another Christ.

As Pope John Paul II says, during this year dedicated to the Eucharist, may the sons and daughters of the Church of which we, the Vincentian Family, are very much a part, find in the supreme

⁹ Cf., *op. cit.*, Pope JOHN PAUL II, *From a New Heart*.

sacrament of love the wellspring of all communion: communion with Jesus the Redeemer, and, in him, with every human being. By sharing in the one bread and the one cup, we come to realize that we are God's family and that, together, we can make our own effective contribution to building a world based on the values of justice, freedom and peace.¹⁰ So, I say to you, members of the International Association of Charities, be together always, with the poor, on this beautiful road that leads to everlasting peace.

¹⁰ Cf. Pope JOHN PAUL II, *Do Not Be Overcome by Evil, But Overcome Evil with Good*, 1 January 2005.