

LENT 2008

Rome, 6 February 2008

Ash Wednesday

To the Congregation of the Mission

My brothers,

May the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ fill your hearts now and forever!

Lent 2008 has come upon me quickly. So much so that I fear that many of you in far distant communities will not receive this communication at the beginning of the Lenten season.

What I would like to share with you this year comes from a dialog I had via the internet with a confrere who had a legitimate concern about the quality of the communal prayer in his local community. In the back and forth comments, we each reflected on what we considered significant with regard to our communal prayer life. At one point, because I liked the quality of his reflections, I asked if he would put together some thoughts that I might incorporate into my Lenten letter for 2008. He agreed to that and so I present to you here a combination of our reflections concerning common prayer.

As we prepare to celebrate the gift of Lent, the Word of God calls us to unite ourselves more deeply to the unselfish and obedient suffering and death of Jesus by a conversion of mind and heart and spirit. Just under two weeks ago all of us were reflecting on the meaning of conversion as we celebrated the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul. Paul's conversion itself had a great impact on the conversion of St. Vincent de Paul. This year for the foundational feast I was in Cameroon. There is always something wonderful about the Word of God; no matter how many times we might hear a particular text, it is so dynamic that something new can touch our hearts and deepen our reflection.

This year it struck me that the whole concept of conversion, using Paul's as an example, is intimately bound up with mission. The first Saturday following Ash Wednesday we hear the call or conversion of the tax collector, Levi, known to be a notorious unjust sinner and called so by the Pharisees. But it is such as he that the Lord Jesus has come to call. Levi became a disciple of Jesus responding to the invitation to "Follow me." I would hope that this Lenten season, as we are called both to personal and communal conversion, all of us

might intimately link that with the desire to be more faithful in following Jesus Christ in the mission that he has given us: to evangelize and serve the poor.

As always, God invites us to holiness in community. We need to be careful, as we share the message of Lent with those we serve, that we always encourage Lent's effectiveness in ourselves. I would like to strongly recommend to you, my brothers, that this Lent we share a common effort to improve our prayer in common. A number of years ago, Father Maloney called us to make our prayer more beautiful for God and attractive to the young. He meant that invitation to reshape all of our prayer every day, not just as an occasional experience. I am repeating that call to you, a call to improve the daily prayer of your community.

And I would like to add another note: that we pray together so that our community life might be the better. St. Vincent asked us to live together as dear brothers. In the past fidelity was often measured by observance of a universally legislated rule with an order of day that was much the same throughout the world. Today, fidelity can be measured by a member's observance of the covenant that he or she has made with the other members of the house. The covenant, of course, embraces not only our common commitment to an apostolic mission, but also our pledge to support one another in life together and in prayer.¹ I ask you to deepen your commitment to and cooperation with the members of your house to pray together in a true spirit of community as St. Vincent hoped for it. It was Vincent who said:

"Give me a man of prayer and he will be capable of everything. He may say with the apostle, 'I can do all things in him who strengthens me.' The Congregation will last as long as it faithfully carries out the practice of prayer, which is like an impregnable rampart shielding the missionaries from all manner of attack" (SV XI, 83 Coste).

All would agree that saying prayers does not necessarily guarantee that we are praying. We need to pray together in a way that allows us to discover and share our inner selves, our faith and our doubts, our fears and our confidence, our stories of effectiveness and our failures, our commitment to be truly Vincentian. Prayer should help us to know and appreciate one another as individuals within community, to support one another gently and faithfully, to foster tolerance and

¹ For a more developed reflection, cf. ROBERT P. MALONEY, "As Friends Who Love One Another Deeply," in *Vincentiana* 44 (2000/4-5), pp. 335-354.

openness to the different gifts given by the Spirit to each of us. It may very well be that the recitation of Office, as important as that is, does not always support the goals of our communal prayers as brothers. Sometimes the recitation of the Office can be mechanical, lifeless, sometimes it is too fast or not in true unison, conditions we must remedy with unselfish dedication. The traditional way of saying Office does not always offer us space for interpersonal and fraternal sharing.

I encourage you to talk together as dear brothers in your house and to find ways to pray together meaningfully and fraternally as our Constitutions ask of us (C 46). Many of us have collected prayer forms from Community meetings, from books, from parishes and other situations. They can be simple prayers, with periods of silence and time to share our hearts with one another. Prayer can even be spontaneous when we are with our brothers. Another helpful form of communal prayer is *Lectio Divina*, a very common form of prayer used throughout the Congregation.

Once or more a week take the day's Scripture readings, or the readings of Sunday, and share what the selections mean to us personally and how we would preach on them. Some might find recorded music helpful to support their singing, or as a background to their quiet prayer. The confreres of a house should openly and honestly discuss the time and place of their prayer to find the situation most conducive to good prayer.

Let each confrere participate in the house's daily prayer, using whatever creativity and experience he has, each being humble enough to accept the choices made and enter into the prayer with a full heart. Confreres who work with youth or who are young themselves can offer helpful insights into making our prayer attractive to youth. We need to find a working balance between patterns that make a familiar and comfortable space for our prayer and helpful variety that keeps us growing.

Besides Morning and Evening Prayer, there are other opportunities to make our common life more prayerful. For example, a house could add to their weekly schedule or on an occasion, prayers to our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, the Rosary, a house Penance Service, a brother's reception of the Anointing of the Sick, added prayer time on feast days, grace at table — all allow us to deepen our sharing of prayer and to fulfill our desire to live prayerfully within the living circle of our brothers.

Prayer forms can become less prayerful because of too much sameness. For example, if grace before meals is always the same, we might cease praying and just appear to be reciting words.

There is another dimension of our prayer that involves the priests, but all of the faithful should take time to examine their participation in the celebrations of the Eucharist. St. Vincent was a major force in the improvement of the Liturgy in his time. (See Coste I, XIII to get a view of the background of the Liturgy in Vincent's time and his commitment to improving Liturgy among the clergy). The retreats for ordinands, the Tuesday conferences, the work with the ordained and the seminaries all included as part of their goals the improvement of the liturgical knowledge and practice of each individual celebrant. Like Vincent, we live in a time when the Church is experiencing the changes that follow new emphases of an ecumenical council. Some embrace these changes, and some resist them. We should follow our Founder's example of commitment to the teaching of the Church to be men who, in our own practice, lead by example in ourselves and in our work.

I know I ask a lot, but what is more important to any of us than the Eucharist, the "source and summit" of our Christian life? (C 45 § 1). So I ask you to review the rubrics and examine yourselves to see if you have allowed some personal choices, or convenience, or an attitude that "it does not matter" to taint your celebration with inappropriate elements. There used to be a custom among us to reread the rubrics of the Eucharist as part of our annual retreat. That would be a good practice for us now, perhaps even as a house.

There are often diocesan liturgical officials or members of educational institutions available to speak to our members and help us make practical improvements. And in today's world, having yourself videotaped when celebrating in your usual way might be enlightening. The bravest confreres might even show the video to their brothers and ask for comments. We need to practice Vincent's own humility and learn what we need to change so that we may celebrate according to the mind of the Church.

Concerned as we are to animate the Vincentian Family, we should take special care to observe those rubrics that display the role of the baptized in the liturgy. We are aware of their service as Readers and Eucharistic Ministers for example, but we need to be sensitive to the subtler elements of their participation; for example, when we invite them to pray aloud, e.g. Creed or Our Father, we should not turn pages or search for whatever we need next. The responses to the dialog before the Preface and the Great Amen should be said or sung only by the people and not by the clergy, according to the rubrics. Respecting the Assembly's role echoes St. Vincent's dedication to encouraging all the members of the Body of Christ to share the Ministry of Prayer and Service.

We must find a balance between extreme rigidity in our celebration of the Eucharist and self-created individual oddities. There is flexibility in the Liturgy, as a good reading of the documents and of commentators will show, always shaped by our desire to celebrate a Liturgy that draws the assembly into the same Christ-like selfless worship, led by our own unselfishness and humility.

The celebration of the institution of the Eucharist on Holy Thursday is a prime example of the relationship between common prayer (the Eucharist being the example *par excellence* of common prayer) and mission wherein Jesus intimately links charitable service with the sharing of Word and Sacrament.

My brothers, what a blessing for the Church if each of us rededicated ourselves in unselfish humility to join voices with our brothers and sisters in prayer. To paraphrase St. Vincent de Paul, "Give me a community of prayer...."

On a practical note, by way of conclusion, during moments of your common prayer, I ask you to lift up your hearts and minds and voices to the Lord who hears the cry of the poor and pray particularly for our brothers and sisters in troubled places such as Kenya, Eritrea, the Middle East, Northern India and Colombia which presently are countries where our brothers and sisters of the Vincentian Family and the poor that they serve are suffering the most.

"... if we come together before the Lord as the first Christians used to do, he will give himself in turn to us, and remain in us with his lights, and will himself accomplish in and through us the good we are bound to do in his Church" (Letter of St. Vincent, Jan 15, 1650).

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "G. Gregory Gay, C.M.". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "G" and a long, sweeping underline.

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General