

Commission for Promoting Systemic Change

by Robert Paul Maloney, C.M.

In 2006, with the encouragement and financial support of a foundation, the Superior General named a Commission for Promoting Systemic Change. Its members are Norberto Carcellar, C.M.; Ellen Flynn, D.C.; Joseph Foley, C.M.; Robert Maloney, C.M.; Patricia Nava, A.I.C.; Pedro Opeka, C.M. and Gene Smith, S.S.V.P. Fr. Greg gave the commission the following mandate: “To help bring about systemic change through the apostolates of the members of the Vincentian family, especially those ministering to the oppressed poor.” Toward that end, the members of the Commission were asked to study available materials concerning systemic change, to discuss their own involvement in it, to formulate a list of effective strategies for helping the poor emerge from poverty, and subsequently to share the list with the members of the Vincentian Family. The Commission was also asked to propose how these strategies might best be disseminated; e.g., *a*) a book might be published in various languages and be distributed among the members of the Vincentian Family throughout the world for use in ongoing-education programs; *b*) the members of the Commission themselves or others might give seminars on the notion of systemic change and the strategies for bringing it about.

The Commission has now met three times. In its discussions, it has placed particular emphasis on self-help and self-sustaining programs, so that the poor will be active participants in the planning and realization of the projects envisioned. At present, the Commission is moving ahead in the preparation of a book on systemic change called *Seeds of Hope: Stories of Systemic Change*. The book will narrate the “stories” of several projects that have had success in this regard. It will also include a chapter on the spirituality that undergirds systemic change projects, as well as a chapter that will propose a series of best practices, or what the Commission prefers to call “effective strategies flowing from our experience and our Vincentian tradition.” In addition, the Commission has decided to produce a kit to accompany the book or to be used independent of

it. The kit will contain a series of practical materials to assist people who are interested in systemic change; for example, a DVD with videos about some of the stories told in the book, a series of pamphlets on the key questions to be examined in starting a project, a tool for evaluating projects, suggestions about fundraising, and a list of best practices or effective strategies. The Commission has also been asked, eventually, to recommend ways of promoting good money management in the works of the Vincentian Family and among the poor it serves, with a special view toward addressing the root causes of poverty.

Fr. Greg invited the members of the Commission to make a presentation to the International Heads of the various branches of the Vincentian Family at their meeting in Rome on February 2-4, 2007. At that meeting, the Commission spoke of the nature of systemic change, the spirituality that underlies it, and the strategies that foster it. They described projects in Madagascar, the Philippines, England, the Dominican Republic, and other places in which our Family is succeeding not only in serving the immediate needs of the poor, but also in assisting the poor to develop strategies by which they can emerge from poverty. Convinced that there are other projects like these that already exist within the Family, the Commission asked the heads of the family to share the stories of such works. A lively discussion followed. At the end of that discussion, the heads of the various branches of the Family decided to choose systemic change as the Family's focus for at least the next two years, beginning on September 27th, 2007. The Commission will produce a study guide, consisting of five sessions, to help in that process.

Fr. Greg also asked the Commission to assist the members of the General Council in formulating criteria for the annual systemic change award. The criteria formulated are the following:

1. *Involve the poor themselves, including the young and women, at all stages: the identification of needs, planning, implementation, evaluation and revision.*
2. *Have a holistic vision — addressing a series of basic human needs: individual and social, spiritual and physical, especially needs like jobs, health care, housing, education, and spiritual growth.*
3. *Place particular emphasis on self-help and self-sustaining programs that have a special view toward addressing the root causes of poverty.*
4. *Foster transparency, inviting participation in preparing budgets and in commenting on financial reports, while promoting good*

money management and maintaining careful controls over the use of assets.

5. *Construct a shared vision with diverse stakeholders: poor communities, interested individuals, donors, churches, governments, NGOs, the private sector, unions, the media, international organizations and networks, etc.*

Since the Commission has already received a number of invitations to speak about systemic change at the ongoing formation programs of the various branches of the Vincentian Family, it has prepared a workshop for use on those occasions.

The concept of “systemic change” is a modern one. It was unknown in St. Vincent’s time, though St. Vincent himself expressed many related ideas. When he gathered the first group of women to form a “Confraternity of Charity” at Chatillon-les-Dombes in November 1617, he stated, in the Rule he composed for them (SV XIII, 423), that the poor sometimes suffer more from lack of “order” than from lack of persons willing to do charitable works. He continually urged the members of the Family to love the poor “spiritually and corporally” and “affectively and effectively.” He encouraged his followers to examine various elements in the lives of the poor to see what their most important needs were: nourishment, health care, education, work, spiritual care.... Today we are conscious that the poor live within a social system where some or many of those elements are lacking, a system that, if changed, can help a person emerge from poverty. The Commission is focusing on assisting others to design projects which help the poor change the social system within which they live.