

ASH WEDNESDAY

Rome, 25 February 2009

To the members of the Vincentian Family

Dear brothers and sisters,

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

Make room in my inn.
Open wider my heart.
My God is coming
as the lonely person,
as the forgotten one,
the hopeless prisoner,
as the unwanted child,
the homeless IDP¹
as the AIDS sufferer
the unloved outcast.
Lord, I see you coming.
Welcome, Lord, come in.
Your room is ready.

Sister CATHERINE MADIGAN, D.C.

Since having written my Advent letter and promising to follow up in my Lenten letter on some points mentioned there, I have received many reflections concerning those for whom there was no room. Many wrote lists of different examples such as the unemployed, the immigrants, those of different culture, language, color of skin. We live in a world full of prejudices. Each and every one of us, perhaps, has our own that we need to look into, to confront and to heal.

We all, one way or another, exclude others, perhaps even those with whom we live, in our communities and associations. We may look at others and consider them to be strange just because they think differently. Perhaps they are not well kept, maybe they drink

¹ Internally Displaced Person.

too much, perhaps they are too loud or too quiet. We have many excuses just to ignore them.

With the most recent economic crisis that has affected the world, an accentuated selfishness, which is at the bottom of the crisis itself from a moral standpoint, can provoke even among the best of people of good will attitudes to protect what is my own, to pull back on my or our generosity to others. We do so as individuals, as a family, as an association or as a community. The consequence is that those who most suffer, are the poorest of the poor. They only experience a greater abandonment as others pull away from them and draw more into themselves.

Sometimes we may find ourselves saying there is just not enough to go around. And we respond by saying I am sorry, or we are sorry. I find myself saying the same thing to many legitimate requests for help for those who live in poverty.

In this Lenten season let us ask ourselves if perhaps we act too quickly to protect ourselves and our own interests. We need to reflect once again, especially in this time of repentance, on that which helps us to feel our need as well as our neediness. In other words we need to reflect on our willingness to sacrifice, or what we call in our own Vincentian tradition, the virtue of mortification. 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. The other side of mortification is selfishness, a concern for one's own well-being, looking out for one's own personal interests. These attitudes dominate the world in which we live today.

As we practice the art of mortification, it is an opportunity for us, as we say, to tighten our belts, to live more simply in order that those who are usually on the lower side of the scale will feel less the effects of the crisis than usual. We are asked to reverse the scenario, so that it be us and not them who feel the suffering. Saint Vincent practiced this continually when he referred to the poor as our lords and masters. He did not speak of a relationship of equals, but he went to the other extreme in order to help create a more balanced relationship.

Sometimes we are slow to understand what it is that Saint Vincent wants to teach us about putting the poor ahead of ourselves. Rather than drawing in on ourselves in these times of crisis, enveloped in our own selfish attitudes, let this time of Lent be a time of solidarity.

As we read in the gospels during Lent, Jesus is gradually rejected and eventually abandoned just as he and his parents were the day he was born. He experienced utter abandonment on the summit of the cross. Only a few faithful remained; "Standing by the cross of Jesus

were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala" (Jn. 19:25) and John. Each of them, Mary, Mary Magdalen and John had something in common, an unconditional love of Jesus. Mary, as only a mother could have; Mary Magdalen, a repentant sinner who hit bottom and it was true love that lifted her up, the unconditional love of Jesus that transformed her life; and John, the love of a true friend and faithful disciple.

Somehow or another Jesus, in his experience of abandonment "Why have you abandoned me" (Mt. 27:46) as he cried out from the cross, later experienced the intimate presence of his Father filling him with new life in and through the resurrection. He is filled with the healing power of his Father, given new life in order that others might have life. Jesus empowered his disciples with that same capacity to give new life.

Oftentimes, we look to healing as something extraordinary. We sometimes hope for miracles in order to be made anew. There certainly are extraordinary ways in which God breaks into human history making impossible situations possible with new life and new living. Yet many times when we wait for the extraordinary to happen, we let opportunities for change escape us.

God's healing power is not something that is only extraordinary. It is God's love that heals. When we look to Mark's gospel, the leper says, "If you choose, you can make me clean." And Jesus, moved with compassion, stretched out his hand, touched him, and said to him, 'I do choose. Be made clean.' Immediately the leper was healed" (Mk. 1:40-42). Very simple human gestures and actions that come from the heart of Jesus, making a difference in the life of the leper.

It was the power of God's love in the life of Jesus, that healed. Jesus' compassion for him is not something so extraordinary but very ordinary. The love of God makes us one with Jesus in healing, enabling us to be givers of new life.

This year, 2009, the United Nations has declared as the Year of Reconciliation, particularly looking at reconciliation in those countries throughout the world which are war-torn and divided because of many forms violence, strife and poverty. Reconciliation is something that is both civil and spiritual at the same time. One of the consequences of this active reconciliation, being brought together and made whole once again, is the elimination of any sense of others being abandoned or left out. All of us are part of the whole and are invited to live in harmony one with another. Harmony or wholeness is the consequence of the grace of the Sacrament of Reconciliation as well as the consequence of dialogs between nations striving for peace in a spirit of good will.

Working for harmony and reconciliation is not an isolated act. It demands a collaborative effort on the part of all peoples. I would hope that all the members of the Vincentian Family would work to be builders of reconciliation, peace and justice in the world in which we live.

As pointed out by Sister Marie Poole (*Collaboration of St. Vincent and St. Louise*, 2008), we can learn a great deal from our founders, Vincent and Louise, who were destined to interrelate and work together in extraordinary harmony. Vincent and Louise would develop a spirit of equality encompassing complementarity and communion, a mutuality that went far beyond simple collaboration. The fire that was enkindled in the relationship between them and their love and service of those who live in poverty lives on today in the worldwide Vincentian Family. We, as family, are encouraged to live in their wisdom and to see and learn from their ability to build bridges between the classes of society, and to include in decision-making and responsibility those with whom and for whom we minister.

This encapsulizes what we are hoping to accomplish as we deepen our own knowledge of systemic change, a contemporary way of living our Vincentian spirituality today, walking with hope among those who live in poverty.

We, as a Vincentian Family, are called as Vincent and Louise were to recognize and accept our talents as well as our limitations and our capacity to work independently yet jointly. Just as there was never any competition between Vincent and Louise, God forbid that there will ever be any competition between any of the branches of the Vincentian Family. Despite our differences, just as they had theirs, let us be consumed by the love of God and our love of the impoverished. They are our focus. God is the author of all that we do, and we do what we do together in solidarity with those who are poor. As Vincent and Louise were able to count on one another in all circumstances, especially in difficult moments, let that be a lesson for us, especially as we live in these trying times of social, political, economic and religious unrest.

As we walk together through this Lenten season, let us do so in the light of the example of our Founders who stand as beacons of true collaboration and partnership in ministry, a model for all of us in every walk of life.

Lent, my brothers and sisters, is a time of abandonment, a time of mortification, a time of reconciliation, a time of collaboration and solidarity. Lent is a time of harmony and peace. It is a time of new life. It is a time of movement from death to life, a time of moving out of oneself and moving towards the other, and the Other.

May the example and intercession of Mary, the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalen and John enable us to remain steadfast and faithful at the foot of the cross united in our own unconditional love of Him who first loved us. Let it be the love of Christ crucified that urges us.

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 long, sweeping underline that extends to the left.

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General